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Lebanese oil slick hits ancient Phoenician port

By Gideon Long

BYBLOS, Lebanon, Aug 23 (Reuters) – The Lebanese port of Byblos has survived the Romans, the Crusades and the armies of Alexander the Great but now it faces a 21st-century menace, brought to its shores on a tide of war - oil pollution.

A slick caused by Israel's bombardment of a power plant last month during its conflict with Hezbollah guerrillas has spewed a black tide along a 140 km stretch of the coastline.

Few places have been hit harder than Byblos, which dates back 7,000 years and lies 35 km north of Beirut.

Thick black oil laps against the ancient stone wall of the harbour under the shadow of a 13th century watchtower. Workers use a mechanical digger to scoop it from the water and dump it into plastic tanks on the quayside.

From here it is taken to Beirut to be mixed with gravel and stone to make building material. Much of it will be used to patch up roads blown apart by Israeli bombs during the war, which ended with a United Nations-backed truce on August 14.

"Since we started, we've dredged over 100 tonnes of oil from these waters," said Nabil Saad of the Byblos town council. "We still have several more days' work to do."

A kilometre down the coast, around 100 volunteers are shovelling blackened sand from once-white beaches.

Israeli strikes on fuel storage tanks at the Jiyeh power plant south of Beirut on July 13 and 15 led to a leaching of an estimated 10,000-15,000 tonnes of heavy fuel oil into the Mediterranean, according to United Nations and Lebanese estimates.

Environmentalists say the slick could harm dolphins, Bluefin tuna fish and loggerhead turtles.

Baby turtles hatch on the Lebanese coast each summer and then crawl towards the sea. Campaigners fear that when they get there, some will die in the deadly black tide.

The Israeli air and sea blockade of Lebanon, imposed at the start of the 34-day conflict, initially complicated the clean-up operation, making it difficult to assess the slick.

This week, Israel gave UN environmental experts permission for an aerial survey of the spill, described by Lebanese Environment Minister Yacoub Sarraf as the biggest environmental catastrophe in Lebanon's history.

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) has compared it to a 1999 disaster off France when the tanker Erika spilled an estimated 13,000 tonnes of oil into the sea.

"We think it's around 15,000 tonnes which is a big spill by global standards," said Professor Rick Steiner of the University of Alaska, who is advising the Lebanese government on the spill.

Steiner, who has worked on some of the world's worst oil slicks including the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster in Alaska, told reporters this was one of the worst he had seen.

"I was down on the coast here in Beirut this week," Steiner said. "Everything on it - limpets, invertebrate fauna, algae, fish, crabs, mussels - it was all dead."

Complicating the clean-up is the fact that the spill is heavy fuel oil.

"It moves in different ways from crude oil, it's thicker and it doesn't evaporate as easily," Steiner said.

The spillage has spread as far north as Syria and, according to some environmentalists, has even reached eastern Turkey.

After Israel gave permission, UNEP said surveillance flights should be carried out as swiftly as possible. The United Nations has agreed an action plan to deal with the spill but says it needs to raise \$65 million to pay for it.

In Byblos, once a Phoenician port and one of the busiest trading posts in the eastern Mediterranean, the slick has helped decimate a tourist industry already hit by war. Beachside cafes and hotels are empty. Sunbeds lie unused next to oily waters.

Forty-eight kilometres further north, on an island nature reserve off the coast, environmentalists have raked the sand clean in a bid to save turtles due to hatch any day now.

“There are 16 turtle nests at the reserve,” said Manal Nader, director of the institute of the environment at Balamand University in northern Lebanon. “We’re hoping that our action means they will survive.”

Some Lebanese environmentalists say Israel should pay for the clean-up operation, although few believe this will happen.

In the meantime, the inhabitants of Byblos struggle to clean up the mess.

“The place got hammered,” Steiner said. “To see this Phoenician harbour, this important archaeological site covered in toxic oil, it really is heartbreaking.”

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