

Oil spill in Philippines threatens environmental disaster

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Battered by rough waters caused by Typhoon Gaemi last week, an oil tanker capsized and sank on July 25 in the Philippines' Manila Bay, causing potential ecological devastation. As climate change worsens the effects of typhoons and other storms, these natural disasters are compounded by these types of accidents, the result of the subordination of safety to the drive for profits.

The Philippine-flagged MT Terra Nova was carrying 1.4 million litres of industrial fuel oil after leaving its port in Limay, in Bataan province in the northern Philippines. The ship was headed for Iloilo on Panay Island in the central region of the country early last Thursday when it encountered rough waters and heavy rains. The captain attempted to turn back to shore, but the ship took on water from the strong waves and sank, leaking its contents into the sea. One crew member was killed while the other 16 sailors on board were rescued.

Authorities are attempting to downplay the disaster, initially reporting that the fuel leaking into the sea was from the ship's diesel engine, rather than its cargo. Since then, the scope of the disaster is increasingly coming to light. The Philippine Space Agency is reporting that the oil has spread to cover an area of at least 68 square kilometers, a large increase compared to previous reports of only 14 square kilometers. Traces of oil are being reported in fishing villages in the provinces of Bulacan and Cavite.

It is clear from weather conditions that the Terra Nova never should have been allowed to leave port. Typhoon Gaemi reached the northern Philippines on July 22. Fuelled by the warmest ocean temperatures on record due to climate change, the storm intensified and mixed with seasonal monsoon rains, hitting the country hard for days. It triggered floods and landslides that left at least 34 people dead. It was in these conditions that

the Terra Nova attempted to sail only a few days later.

Despite the continued effects from the typhoon, no storm warnings were in effect when the ship left port. The vessel also supposedly met regulatory requirements for travelling in rough weather. These minimal regulations did not stop the Terra Nova from setting sail in dangerous conditions.

Only two days after the first sinking, another fuel tanker also sank off the coast of Bataan, the MTKR Jason Bradley, which was reportedly carrying 5,500 litres of diesel. According to the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), the tanker did not seek clearance to sail amid the rough waters tossed up by Typhoon Gaemi.

Philippine authorities claimed that by Monday it had sealed the leaks from the Terra Nova and would begin removing the oil from the ship to prevent more from leaking out. According to the salvaging company, the sealing up of the pressure valves on the Terra Nova will allow the siphoning of oil from the capsized vessel. Once enough of the fuel has been removed, the ship will be refloated and towed to shore where the cleanup process can continue.

In a further attempt to downplay the disaster, PCG Central Luzon spokesperson Lieutenant Commander Michael John Encina claimed over the weekend that as they had begun to reduce the oil flow rate from the ship, the oil spill was now "very controllable."

No fishing ban has been put in place despite the huge amount of oil that has leaked into the sea and the fact that fishermen have reported a strong odor in the waters where they work. Renan Honsana, from Tanza in Cavite, told Reuters, "This oil spill will have a big effect on us fishermen because we rely on the sea and it has been affected by the oil."

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources claimed on Monday that raw and cooked fish caught in

the area around the sunken Terra Nova passed the “sensory analysis” or, in other words, smell tests and not laboratory tests. This is just a further indication of how safety and public health are ignored.

These types of accidents are not uncommon in the Philippines. The last major oil spill occurred just last year on February 28 when the MT Princess Empress sank off the coast of Mindoro Island in central Philippines, spilling over 800,000 liters of industrial fuel oil. The oil spill affected major ecosystems, not only in Mindoro itself, but as far as Palawan Island and Antique, a province in Panay Island.

According to the government’s Environment Department, up to 5,185 hectares of marine habitat on Mindoro Island and around the Western Visayas Islands had been affected. The environmental damage, particularly to coral reefs and mangroves, was estimated at over 9.52 billion pesos (\$US162 million) and estimated damages to agriculture amounted to at least 4.93 billion pesos (\$US84 million).

The devastation wrought by these oil spills has ruined critical fisheries off the Philippine coast, relied on both for food supplies and as a source of livelihood for the country’s sizeable and impoverished fishing communities. The men in these poor communities of seaside villages fish the open ocean at night, tossing hand-mended nets from small outrigger boats, known as banca, and the women bring the catch to market in the hours of early dawn.

Washington has seized on these imperiled communities as a pretext for its drive to war against China in the South China Sea. Statements from various leading military officials, often during the ever more aggressive joint US-Philippine wargames, all speak of defending the rights of these poor fishermen. They claim they are protecting traditional Filipino fishing grounds from Chinese occupation.

The indifference displayed by the Philippine government to the oil spill, the lack of any substantive regulation to prevent it, the torpid official response to the growing catastrophe and the absence of any aid from the United States government, all combine to give the lie to these repeated declarations.

To cite just one example of the damage wrought by the US military in Philippine waters: in 2013, a US Minesweeper illegally sailed through undisputed Philippine waters and ran aground on the UNESCO

World Heritage Site, Tubbataha Reef. The US ship damaged over 2,345 square meters of the national park, one of the most important sites of marine biodiversity in the world.

The damage done to Philippine fishing grounds, denying Filipino fishermen access to their traditional livelihood, has been wrought, not by alleged Chinese aggression, but by rapacious capitalism, the complicity and indifference of the Philippine government, and the actions of the US military.



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