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Oil Spill Crisis off Tobago's Coast May Require National Emergency Declaration, Prime Minister Says

Mystery deepens around unidentified ship as officials struggle to halt oil flow

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Capsized ship in Tobago waters lying on its side in the ocean. The hull is partially submerged, revealing signs of rust and marine growth, a sign that the vessel has been in this overturned position for an extended period.

A growing ecological disaster unfolding in the southern Caribbean may prompt Trinidad & Tobago's government to declare a national emergency, as an oil spill off the coast of Tobago is "not under control," according to Prime Minister Keith Rowley.

Last Wednesday, just before 7:30 a.m., the Tobago Emergency Management Agency began to receive reports of a capsized ship just off the coast of the Cove Eco-Industrial Estate. A thick, black, oil-like substance also began washing up on nearby shorelines, from Canoe Bay to Scarborough, as well as points further north.

By Wednesday evening, a team of divers deployed to inspect the wreckage reported that murky waters and the vessel's constant shifting due to ocean currents made it impossible to read the International Maritime Organization (IMO) registration number from the stern of the boat where it is printed, even after repeat dives.

By Thursday, as on-shore cleanup efforts began, people reported the smell of asphalt blanketing the west side of the island, with businesses in the capital of Scarborough reportedly forced to close due to the disruption. More dives confirmed the absence of anyone on board or any signs of human remains. Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly Farley Augustine said during a Thursday press conference that the currently working theory is that the ship may have been submerged for some time, drifting undetected towards Tobago and leaking oil until it ran aground on the coral reef near Canoe Bay.

Additional dives on Friday revealed the main living quarters and much of the boat's superstructure had been ripped off, with a debris trail leading away from its current location. "What we need to do is to follow that debris stream and see if we can see any kind of remnant of anyone who may be trapped inside," said Alvin Douglas of Tobago Marine Safety and Security Services Ltd, head of the emergency dive team. Divers also discovered that a cable had been connected to the bow of the vessel, suggesting that the vessel may have been under tow when it capsized.

Meanwhile, as questions about the origin – and owner – of the ship swirled, the work to contain the spill continued, as divers reported that the hole from which the effluent is leaking is currently not able to be plugged. Onshore teams were tasked with removing oil-soaked sargassum from the beaches, while booms were deployed near the still-leaking vessel to contain the spill, as well as around the Scarborough harbor to protect it from the encroaching spill.

During a press conference on Sunday, Mr. Augustine and Mr. Rowley disclosed that several key questions still remain. According to Mr. Augustine, officials have "still not been able to identify the vessel by name," despite earlier reporting by local media outlets calling the vessel "Gulfstream". The IMO number is still also unknown. "So the next task is to use infrared to more or less identify the structure of the vessel and to see what is contained therein," Mr. Augustine explained.

"That vessel could have come to us from any kind of operation, especially if the operation is illicit," remarked Mr. Rowley, the prime minister. "We're not sure if it's a freighter, a tanker or a barge," he continued, explaining that testing is needed to determine what hydrocarbon substance is being spilled into the water and washing up on shore. "We haven't been able to determine whether it is bunker fuel, fuel for propulsion in the vessel or raw crude," he said, noting that officials are awaiting the results of testing to determine exactly what is being leaked from the vessel.

Currently, the response is still in the containment phase, disclosed Mr. Rowley. "Then we'll want to move from that stage to...emptying the vessel," he said. That operation would exceed the capacity of Trinidad & Tobago to deal with, the prime minister noted. "Once we start talking about salvaging, which is to get the vessel into a situation where we can control what goes on, we have to have outside help."

Mr. Rowley added that “significant help” has already been offered by friendly nations, and that officials are “currently engaged in talking to people who have more capacity than Trinidad & Tobago.”

Despite noting that the situation was currently stabilized, Mr. Rowley warned that the vessel’s “precipitous” current location left it at the mercy of tides and currents. “New holes can open and then the vessel could slip into deeper water and the situation can change,” he noted, saying that precautions still needed to be taken, and operations need to continue with urgency.

Mr. Augustine, the chief secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly, reported that containment efforts would continue with the imminent placement of additional, larger booms that can handle the volume of oil that is currently spilling out into the water. Oil skimmers and vacuum tankers have also been deployed to remove oil from the water. However, as Mr. Rowley pointed out, the response team’s carefully laid-out plans could be upended by a change in prevailing weather conditions.

Meanwhile, the spill has cast a pall over Tobago’s Carnival festivities. Sunday’s Junior Parade of the Bands was canceled out of an abundance of concern for health and safety, while the stench of oil lingers over several communities in the vicinity of the spill. Authorities have warned fishers and recreational seagoers to steer clear of the area. “I know we have a penchant for sightseeing,” Mr. Augustine said, noting that certain areas had been designated no-go zones for health and safety reasons. “We beg of you please to be very careful,” he asked residents.