Lebanese slick suffocating sea bed (23 August 2006)

Oil spilled during hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah has now sunk to the sea bed, choking sea life with a toxic carpet.

Between 10,000 and 15,000 tonnes of fuel oil are believed to have reached the Mediterranean following the bombing of the Jiyyeh power station and the clean up operation was initially made impossible by the ongoing instability in the region.

The slick is more than 150km long, but its full extent has been difficult to assess due to an air and sea blockade.

This week activist organisation Greenpeace and the Lebanese Union of Professional Divers published video footage of the underwater slick at Jiyyeh, stretching over 100m out to sea.

They argue that the seabed oil could continue to be a problem once the surface clean-up has been completed, as currents and wind could drag it up and lead to further contamination of the coastline.

"The scene is horrific, the seabed is completely covered with fuel oil which will threaten marine life for many years to come if it is not contained and removed immediately" said Mohammed El-Sarji, Greenpeace activist and head of the Lebanese Union of Professional Divers who conducted several dives in Jiyyeh.

Oil spill expert Professor Rick Steiner from the University of Alaska, who is in Beirut advising the Lebanese government and various non governmental organisations commented: "This might be the first time ever that seabed contamination has been documented this clearly. The oil is extensive and very toxic and we need to find a way to save the marine environment."

Greenpeace reiterated its call for a thorough investigation and analysis of the impact of the oil spill, along with other environmental casualties of the conflict.

Zeina Al Hajj, Greenpeace co-ordinator in Beirut said: "The images are alarming and it is clear that a full assessment of the extent of the oil spill will need underwater investigation along the coast as well as aerial and ground surveillance; the blockade must be lifted for this work to proceed.

"More effort is needed to recover as much oil as possible from contaminated areas. A full damage assessment must be carried out to cover all the environmental impacts caused by the war and, as a priority, caused by this spill."

Greenpeace has been working to gather information for a post conflict environmental assessment in Lebanon and will provide the authorities with the details of this seabed contamination. The organisation has offered whatever help it can provide to the regional and national authorities and will be contributing to the mitigation efforts.

Sam Bond