Lebanon hinders NGO oil spill work

Joseph Mayton
Middle East Times
August 22, 2006

BEIRUT -- Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon have urged immediate action to clean up the beaches to avoid detrimental effects on the environment and the people living in close proximity to where one of the world's worst oil spills has occurred during the recent 34-day war.

However, last week the Lebanese government refused to give permission to the leading NGO spearheading the cleanup to use heavy machinery, dramatically hindering its efforts.

Oil has been poured across the eastern Mediterranean Sea from Lebanon; approximately 15,000 tons of heavy fuel oil was released into the ocean following an Israeli airstrike on the Jiyeh power plant July 15.

Green Line, the local NGO that has taken the lead in the oil spill, says that concerted effort is needed to avoid an environmental catastrophe.

"We have equipment from ministries and have gotten experts to assess the damage and how we should go about cleaning up the mess," Jana Nakhal, logistics coordinator for Green Line, said. "But now they have shut down our machinery and it is up to volunteers to help or we won't be able to stop the damage."

It has been over a month since the spill and there has not been an organized effort to begin a cleanup process.

On the shores of Beirut fishermen continue to wade knee-deep into water that is black from the oil in the water. Green Line said that oil has settled deeper into the sand, has absorbed into the rocks, scattered further into the sea, and settled on the seabed.

According to experts brought in by the NGO, immediate action must be taken by the government if they are to avoid a greater humanitarian catastrophe.

Nakhal said that the oil has already seeped 45 centimeters deep into the ground. Some experts argue that another 10 to 15 centimeters in some places will affect the water table.

Despite the restrictions put in place against Green Line by the Lebanese government, the group still runs shifts of about 40 volunteers, who clean the oil from the beaches by hand. It is strenuous work, especially in the hot and humid summer that characterizes Lebanon.

"What we are trying to do is to create a snowball effect to galvanize other NGO's to get them to help us and join the fight," Nakhal continued.
"Even if the ministry isn't going to allow us to use the machinery we have, they need to make people aware of the risks that the oil spill causes," she added.

The ministry of environment said that it had no comment on denying access to cleanup efforts. It maintains that a full ecological assessment must be done before a cleanup can be established.

Green Line says that the main reason that the government wants them to stop cleaning the area is money. The Lebanese government wants to receive money for the damage from outside sources.

"They do this in order to embezzle the funds," says a former member of Green Line who refused to give her name. "I think people are beginning to notice this and that is why they have received so many volunteers already."

On August 18 Green Line and their expert, Professor Rick Steiner of the University of Alaska, asked the Israeli government if they could take a French helicopter and survey the northern coastline of Lebanon in order to see the damage away from the immediate coast. Israel refused to give permission.

"It is unfortunate that we could not get approval for this urgently necessary mission," Steiner said in a statement released by the organization. "We need to get out over the water to survey the exact extent of the oil now, so that we can decide what offshore response assistance may be appropriate. Until we do, it's a lot of guess work," Steiner added.

Steiner, who has worked on numerous oil spills worldwide including the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989, had requested the use of French helicopters for the reconnaissance mission. The French embassy appealed to the Israelis for permission but was subsequently denied.

Steiner is a professor at the University of Alaska and has been advising NGOs and the Lebanese government on the most effective means of cleansing the shores from the oil spill.

Steiner says that the oil spill is more dangerous than in Alaska because it has taken the government so long to begin to even deal with the spill. He notes that in many places where the oil has taken hold, waves are green because the plankton is dead and much of the marine life is also destroyed, if not killed.

"We cannot wait any longer and so we need to get going on this process of cleaning, but it is hard because the government is not doing anything and we haven't heard from other NGOs at this point," Nakhal added.