

The Prestige: sunken oil tanker causes environmental disaster

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Galicia, Spain -

"Happy Christmas to everybody. Here instead of a white Christmas we have a black Christmas. Today I woke up at 7:00 am to help with the cleaning, together with thousands of other volunteers, fishermen and soldiers. I didn't have to walk very far. I was supposed to go to an island off the coast which I can see from my window. It is a national park. But there is a storm today, and they said that it could be dangerous to go ashore by the small pier of the island. So we were sent back home."

This is part of an e-mail from my friend Diego, who is now living the catastrophe of the sunken oil tanker Prestige from close by. On 13th November 2002, the 26-year old ship which was on its way from St. Petersburg to Singapore with more than 77.000 metric tons of fuel oil on board, was caught in a severe storm just off Spain's north-western coast called Galicia. Being damaged by the rough tide, the so-called single-hulled tanker began to spill oil. The Spanish authorities then decided to have the ship (transporting twice as much oil as the infamous Exxon Valdez, which went aground in Alaskan waters in 1989) towed westward, further away from land. The reason was that they wanted to reduce the danger of the spilling oil to reach their Iberian Peninsula.

On 19th November, during its transportation the oil tanker broke in two pieces and sank. Both the decisions of the Spanish authorities and of the Dutch Salvage Company Smit (which stated that it had no other option than to transport the Prestige southward in search of calmer waters, instead of westward, deeper into the Atlantic Ocean) are still investigated. Lying on the bottom of the sea at a depth of 3.6 kilo-metres, oil is leaking out of the ship up till today, reaching not only Spain's Galician coast but also the shores of Portugal and France. My friend Diego, a physics student at the University of Vigo, a coastal city in Galicia, told me after having witnessed the tragedy for the first time: "I had a strange sensation to be on the beach where I come very often in summertime. It's now completely covered with black oil sediment."



The Prestige is going down.

In Galicia, Christmas 2002 will always be remembered as unhappy and difficult days. No one knows better than the inhabitants of Galicia what is now happening to their coasts. Two months after the Prestige went down the impact is still huge. The damage to the local environment is enormous. Different organizations have analyzed the situation and have warned that Galicia's sea ecosystems will be changed for many years.

The affected area has a large number of protected habitats. The black tide has already caused death to marine birds in a way never registered before in Spain, and probably also in Europe. The National Park of the Atlantic Islands, home to four of the most important bird colonies in the Atlantic areas, has been dramatically affected. According to Bird Life magazine, the number of birds killed during the first two months of the oil spills was between 65.000 and 130.000. The most hard-hit species are the Guillemot, the Razorbill and the Puffin.

So far, the oil leakage has damaged more than 1000 kilometres of coast from the North of Portugal to the South of France, with Galicia right in the centre. At least 50.000 tons of oil are supposed to be still inside the Prestige tanker. And some 120 tons of the black substance are leaking out every day, into the open sea. The dominant sea currents and winds push it in the direction of the continent. An important quantity of the oil has deposited itself on the sea bottom, where cleaning is difficult. This sediment material will probably act as a contamination source for a long time to come. Investigations made on spots of similar environmental accidents in the past show that the recuperation of the threatened ecosystems may last as long as 15 to 20 years.

Regarding Galicia, due to the Prestige disaster its fish industry is now facing serious problems, in a society that lives mainly from this activity. Many families have been directly hit, and the rest of the Galician society

is preparing for hard times too. The industrial sector linked with fishery and navigation has also had a blow, as has the commercial sector. Also, tourism will suffer as many beaches have been closed.

Next to environmental problems, the Prestige tragedy has also caused political turbulence in Spain, especially in Galicia's local government. The accident has spurred Galician nationalism. Immediately after the oil tanker had gone down and the first oil spills started to reach the cliffs and beaches of Galicia, the national government appeared hesitant or made the wrong decisions. Because of its passiveness valuable time was lost, a quick and effective solution wasn't there. Rather late the army was sent in to assist in the cleaning operation, though other countries had already offered help earlier on. From the first moment, local fishermen, volunteers and environmental groups were and still are the main groups to clean up the mess on Galicia's affected shores.

Moreover, there has been great confusion, even manipulation of information, especially from the side of some Spanish media. For example, the national television channel TVE and the regional television channel of Galicia TVG have both only defended the position of the government instead of displaying its failures in solving the crisis. Fortunately we live in a democracy, so there are other media alternatives to inform the public about the Prestige oil spill in a more objective way, without being biased. It was incredible when watching the private television channel Tele 5, as it was broadcasting amazing helicopter images of the seascape covered with oil slicks, and thousands of people who were protesting against the central government at the same time. My friend Diego told me: "I watched the news on both Tele 5 and TVE, and it was like they were describing two different worlds."

A massive movement of solidarity has risen from the rest of Spain and from parts of Europe to support Galicia and the other stricken areas. It is the only positive thing of the disaster. Until today, thousands of volunteers, for the most part students but also housewives, pensioners and workers from in- and outside Galicia, have spent their free time to help cleaning up the coast, collecting the oil. They are given food and shelter by local families. Not always dressed in protective clothes, they sometimes have to risk their health. And as said before, there are also the military and special taskforces who have been sent to clean the cliffs.

Soon we will know the exact consequences of this fatal disaster. The situation has not changed much over the past two and a half months. Cliffs and beaches along both the Galician coast, and to a lesser extent the French and Portuguese coasts, are still repeatedly impacted by oil slicks. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) points out that more similar accidents are to be expected. They and other environmental groups are calling for a ban on the one-hulled oil tankers (like the Prestige was), only allowing two-hulled and therefore safer tankers to cruise the seas. But for Galicia this comes too late. 'Nunca Mais' (never again) is all it can hope for.

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