U.S. Expert: China Oil Spill Bigger than Exxon Valdez

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BEIJING (AP) — China's worst known oil spill is dozens of times larger than the government has reported — bigger than the famous Exxon Valdez spill two decades ago — and some of the oil was dumped deliberately to avoid further disaster, an American expert said Friday.

China's government has said 1,500 tons (461,790 gallons) of oil spilled after a pipeline exploded two weeks ago near the northeastern city of Dalian, sending 100-foot- (30-meter-) high flames raging for hours near one of the country's key strategic oil reserves. Such public estimates stopped within a few days of the spill.

But Rick Steiner, a former University of Alaska marine conservation specialist, estimated 60,000 tons (18.47 million gallons) to 90,000 tons (27.70 million gallons) of oil actually spilled into the Yellow Sea.

"It's enormous. That's at least as large as the official estimate of the Exxon Valdez disaster" in Alaska, he told The Associated Press. The size of the offshore area affected by the spill is likely more than 400 square miles (1,000 square kilometers), he added.

The estimates, though rough, could complicate China's efforts to move on from its latest environmental disaster: Dalian's mayor already declared a "decisive victory" in the oil spill cleanup, state media reported this week.

The spill has caused at least one death when a cleanup worker drowned in the sticky crude, and thousands of Dalian residents have used everything from their bare hands to chopsticks to pick the goo from the sea.

Steiner, who worked on the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill, announced the China estimates after touring the oil spill area as a consultant for the environmental group Greenpeace China.

"It's habitual for governments to understate oil spills," Steiner told a news conference. "But the severity of the discrepancy is unusual here."

An official with Dalian's propaganda department told The Associated Press he was not aware of Steiner's estimates and had no comment.

"I think we should follow the figures released by the city government," said the man, who gave his surname as Li.

The government has said the pipeline exploded July 16 after workers continued to

inject an agent to strip sulfur from oil after a tanker had finished unloading its cargo.

According to Steiner, firefighters at the scene later told Greenpeace China that workers had let oil escape from other tanks in the area to reduce the risk that another nearby tank containing the chemical dimethylbenzene would explode as well.

The oil terminal is owned by China National Petroleum Corp., Asia's biggest oil and gas producer by volume.

Steiner said his estimates came from the fact the oil storage tank that was destroyed had a capacity of about 90,000 tons (27.70 million gallons) and reportedly had just been filled by the tanker.

He said his lower estimate of 60,000 tons (18.47 million gallons) came from the rate of oil recovery by thousands of fishing boats dispatched for the cleanup.

"They've already collected more oil than the official estimate of the spill size," he told The Associated Press.

He praised the makeshift cleanup efforts: "Very low-tech. The thing is that it worked."

But he said the thousands of cleanup workers face possible health concerns after being told to help out, receiving no protective gear and being coated in crude.

In addition, this year's shellfish harvest has been wiped out, causing tens of millions of dollars of economic losses, he said. And many miles (kilometers) of beaches, the jewel of Dalian's tourist industry, remain heavily oiled.

Some Chinese environmental experts have said the oil spill's effects around Dalian, once named China's most livable city, will be felt for years.

Both Steiner and Greenpeace China warned their oil spill estimates could be 50 percent off because of the lack of information about the spill and expressed their frustration, putting "information transparency" at the top of their list of demands Friday.

"(The oil) could have spread to North Korea by now. As far as we know, nobody knows," Steiner told the news conference.

Associated Press researcher Yu Bing contributed to this report.

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