

Thai Oil Spill Spreads to New Bay on Resort Island

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BANGKOK (AP) — Workers in white suits used buckets to scoop up globs of crude oil blackening the once white sands and emerald waters of a tourist island in Thailand's eastern sea on Tuesday, as the oil slick continued to spread three days after leaking from a nearby pipeline.



Workers remove crude oil during a clean up operation on the beach of Prao Bay on Samet Island in Rayong province eastern Thailand Tuesday, July 30, 2013. About 50,000 liters (13,200 gallons) of crude oil that leaked from a pipeline operated by PTT Global Chemical Plc. has reached the popular tourist island in Thailand's eastern sea despite continuous attempts to clean it up. (AP Photo)

Progress was being made on cleaning the oil that washed into Prao Bay on the west coast of Samet Island on Sunday night, though not fast enough, and rough seas and strong winds spread thin films of dispersed oil to a rocky bay farther north, said Rayong Deputy Gov. Supeepat Chongpanish.

"The most urgent issue is to get rid of the oil from the bay as soon as possible," Supeepat said in a telephone interview. "The longer it stays on, the worse effect it will have on the people and environment."

Provincial authorities have declared Prao Bay a disaster zone, but said that more popular beaches on the island's east coast remain untouched. There is concern, however, that if not contained soon the slick could spread to beaches across the island and on the nearby mainland.

Authorities said it would take some time to assess the environmental damage.

About 50,000 liters (13,200 gallons) of oil — about the amount contained in one and a half tanker trucks — spilled into the Gulf of Thailand off Rayong province on Saturday morning from a leak in a pipeline operated by PTT Global Chemical Plc., a

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subsidiary of state-owned oil and gas company PTT Plc.

The company said it detected a leak when crude oil from a tanker moored offshore was being transferred to the pipeline, 20 kilometers (11 miles) from a refinery in Map Ta Phut, one of the largest industrial estates in Southeast Asia. The leak has since been fixed.

The slick floated in the sea for more than a day before it began washing ashore on Samet Island, a small resort island that each year draws some 1 million foreign and domestic tourists due to its white sand beaches and its proximity to Bangkok, 140 kilometers (90 miles) away.

PTTGC apologized on Monday and said the cleanup will likely be completed within three days.

That appeared to be wishful thinking, however, and the contaminated beach looked much the same Tuesday, when rain storms briefly interrupted cleanup operations.

"From what I can see it's still a long way to go," said Suthi Atchasai, an environmental activist, who was helping with the efforts to clean the bay. "Oil slicks, although reduced, are still on the beach and in the water."

He said about 1,500 soldiers, workers and volunteers were on the beach Tuesday.

Tourists have checked out from the three resorts on Prao Bay, with some moving to other beaches on the island.

"The incident happened during the low season and on the quiet side of the island, so the impact on tourism is still very limited," said Chuchart Oncharoen, the director of Rayong's tourism authority. "If the spill is eliminated within three days like PTTGC speculated, tourists will likely stay."

Critics have accused the company of failing to be prepared for such an emergency despite previous incidents.

"This is a major failure in disaster preparedness of PTTGC," said Srisuwan Janya, a lawyer and chairman of Bangkok-based Stop Global Warming Association. "They must be held responsible for having no clear guidelines on how to tackle such incident and for letting the damage spiral out of control."

Srisuwan said his association has called for government agencies to take legal action and seek compensation from the company.

The incident is the fourth major oil spill in Thailand's history, according to the Energy Ministry.

In 2009, another PTT subsidiary was involved in the Montara oil spill, one of Australia's worst oil disasters, in the Timor Sea off western Australia.

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