Thailand Resort Beach Blackened by Oil Spill

THANYARAT DOKSONE, Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Black waves of crude oil washed up on a beach at a popular tourist island in Thailand's eastern sea despite attempts to clean up the oil up over the weekend after it leaked from a pipeline, officials said Monday.

In this photo taken Saturday, July 27, 2013, a cleaning vessel clears the oil after about 50 tons of crude oil was leak from a pipe spilled into the sea off Rayong province, eastern Thailand. The oil spill that leaked from a pipeline, operated by a subsidiary of state-owned oil and gas company PTT Plc, has reached a popular tourist island in Thailand's eastern sea despite continuous attempts to clean it up over the weekend, officials said Monday. **(AP Photo/The Nation-Atchara)**

Tourists on Samet island were warned to stay away from the once-serene beach, marred by inky globs as hundreds of workers in white jumpsuits labored to scrape the sand clean and remove oil from the water.

About 50 tons of oil spilled into the sea off Rayong province on Saturday morning from a leak in the pipeline operated by PTT Global Chemical Plc, a subsidiary of state-owned oil and gas company PTT Plc.

The leak was the fourth major oil spill in the country's history, Energy Minister Pongsak Raktapongpaisal said.

Streaks of crude oil about 300 meters (1,000 feet) wide marred the shore of Prao Bay on Samet Island, one of the most popular beach destinations for Thai and foreign tourists in the Gulf of Thailand, Rayong Deputy Gov. Supeepat Chongpanish said Monday.

He said authorities closed the bay as 300 workers attempted to remove the oil from the white beach and the water.

"The top priorities right now are to get rid of the oil on the sand and the seawater,

and to make sure the spill doesn't spread to other shores," Supeepat said. "This is a very beautiful, white, sandy beach, so we want to make the spill go away as soon as possible."

"The black waves started rolling in since last night and by the morning the beach was all tainted with oil," said Kevin Wikul, the assistant front desk officer at a resort in Prao Bay. "We have advised our guests against going near the beach and some of them have asked for early check-outs."

The nearby area has been declared a disaster zone by provincial authorities, and those affected by the spill will receive immediate assistance.

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 company said in a statement Sunday that it has flown in oil spill management experts and a plane from Singapore to remove the crude oil. Thai navy vessels also joined the cleanup efforts.

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

"The spill is definitely having an impact on the environment, but we have not detected any deaths of marine animals yet at this point," provincial Gov. Wichit Chatphaisit said. "PTT will have to take responsibility for the damage this has caused."

He said pollution control department officials had expressed concern about the effects of the chemical used to clean up the spill.

PTTGC apologized for the incident and said the cleanup will likely be completed within three days.

"We acknowledge this incident has damaged our reputation and we will not let it happen again," CEO Anon Sirisaengtaksin told a news conference.

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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