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Singapore has closed popular beach

By Roberto Coloma

Singapore has closed popular beaches on the east coast just ahead of the school summer holidays after an oil spill from a tanker damaged in a collision hit its shores, authorities said.

On Tuesday, an estimated 2,500 tons of crude oil leaked from the Malaysian-registered tanker MT Bunga Kelana 3 into the sea after the vessel collided with a bulk carrier about 13 kilometres south-west of Singapore.

In a statement issued late Wednesday the National Environment Agency said it had put up warning signs along the affected coastal area, a stretch of about 7 kilometres, and advised the public to stay away from the beaches and not to swim there.

"The extent of the impact is currently minimal, but will require some clean-up over the next few days," the agency said.

The four-week summer holiday starts Friday with a public holiday. Singapore's east coast park is a popular spot for outdoor activities and packed with both locals and foreigners at weekends and during holidays.

Efforts to contain and clean up the oil slick at sea were going on, the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore said, adding that there were no further reports of oil leaking from the damaged vessel.

"As a precautionary measure, a containment boom will remain around Kelana 3," it said, noting that weather, tidal and wind conditions had so far been favourable.

Singapore environmentalists said they were closely monitoring the situation.

But it was too early for a concluding evaluation of any damage as the oil slick hit the coast just on Wednesday, said Louis Ng, of the activist group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society.

Wong Tuan Wah, director of the conservation division of Singapore's National Parks Board, said that "as a precautionary measure, we have put up booms to protect the sensitive habitats" at Pulau Ubin, a small island with rich biodiversity north of the accident site.

The tanker, operated by Malaysian company AET, collided with the bulk carrier MV Waily, registered under the flag of St Vincent and the Grenadines, in one of the world's busiest shipping routes along the Singapore and Malacca straits.

Ship traffic was not affected by the accident or the clean-up efforts, the port authority said. There were no reports of injured crew after the accident.