

My Sinchew

27 May 2010

Singapore closes popular beaches after oil spill

By Roberto Coloma

Emergency crews on Thursday rushed to clean up popular public beaches stained by an oil slick on the eve of Singapore's summer school holidays.

A pungent chocolate-coloured sludge marred the coast along the popular East Coast Park after crude spilled from a tanker damaged in a collision in the Singapore Strait slipped out of a floating cordon.

Officials maintained that most of the spill was still far from the shores of the city-state, which has one of the world's busiest ports and expects 11.5 million to 12.5 million tourists this year, more than double its population.

"The main oil slick is largely contained out at sea," a spokeswoman for the Maritime and Port Authority told AFP in the wake of Tuesday's incident.

A National Environment Agency (NEA) advisory said: "The extent of the impact is currently minimal, but will require some clean-up over the next few days."

Signs have been put up to advise the public to stay away from the affected beaches until the cleaning is complete and the powerful smell of oil served as another warning that the beach was unsafe.

The NEA estimated that some 7.2 kilometres (4.5 miles) of beach and rock bunds along the east coast, as well as a canal, had been affected by the slick after wind and tide conditions made containment at sea difficult.

The Malaysian-registered tanker MT Bunga Kelana 3 was carrying nearly 62,000 tonnes of crude when it collided with the MV Waily, a bulk carrier registered in St Vincent and the Grenadines.

About 2,500 tonnes of crude leaked from a gash on the double-hulled tanker's port side, officials said. Such tankers are designed to limit spillage in case of a rupture.

Emergency crews are using biodegradable dispersants and absorbent material to soak up the oil, while 3.3 kilometres of booms circled the main oil slick in the busy shipping lane straddling Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

A committee that coordinates oil-spill operations among the three neighbours issued a statement Thursday saying quick action "helped to mitigate the impact of this incident" and vowed to "further enhance joint responses in the future."

At one of the most popular spots along the coastal park, two teams of mostly Bangladeshi workers were collecting sludge from the beach with shovels and storing the contaminants in black rubbish bags for disposal.

"The smell (of oil) is not that much today," said park visitor Jenny Goh, who took her son from their nearby condominium to take a look at the damaged beach. "The first day was bad."

The month-long school summer holiday starts on Friday, a public holiday.

On long weekends, Singaporeans, expatriates and tourists normally throng the park for swimming, camping, cycling and barbecues.

Singaporean environmentalists were closely monitoring the situation and preparing to take part in the clean-up if needed.

"If it more or less hits the sands, it's mainly the invertebrates like the crabs, the sea snails that will likely be affected," said Louis Ng, executive director of activist group Animal Concerns Research and Education Society.

The government has loaned canvas skirting to offshore seafood farms near the spill site to cover their underwater nets and prevent oil from contaminating their fish stocks.

The collision took place in a busy maritime channel but ship traffic was not affected by the incident and clean-up, port officials said.

Singapore is one of the world's leading ports, with data from the port authority showing the island-nation handled 472 million tonnes of cargo last year, with bulk oil cargo constituting 37.5 percent of the total.