

Gulf Oil Disaster: A Transatlantic Pollution Catastrophe Looms

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The Gulf of Mexico oil spill disaster threatening to wipe out tourism and fishing industries and countless numbers of marine wildlife habitats along the entire US southeast coast could be just the prelude to a much greater transatlantic pollution catastrophe.

The furthest eastern state of Florida - 600 miles from the Deepwater Horizon spill site off Louisiana - is next at risk to devastating pollution as a result of giant undersea oil plumes being swept up by fast-moving Caribbean currents known as the Gulf Loop. But US government officials are now warning neighbouring countries to also prepare for contamination. Indeed, the US state department has taken the highly unusual step of contacting the Cuban government to warn it of the pollution risk.

With efforts to curtail the flow of oil gushing from the seabed well by British Petroleum proving ineffective a month after the explosion on an exploratory rig, it is feared by several marine scientists and engineers based in the region that the spill could reach up to a total of six million barrels of crude oil equivalent - 25 times greater than the 1989 Exxon Valdez incident off Alaska, which up to this was considered one of the worst human-made environmental disasters.

With up to 70,000 barrels of oil spewing into the Caribbean every day, there are well-founded fears that the Gulf Loop will pass on its contamination load to the Gulf Stream which, in turn, pours into the North Atlantic. If this happens then the countries of Western Europe that are bathed by this giant oceanic current will also suffer the hydrocarbon toxic fallout from the Deepwater Horizon, scientists say. The multibillion-dollar damage to communities, industries and the incalculable ecological cost might then be multiplied to trillions.

And the full extent of this transatlantic catastrophe does not even stop there. In the South Atlantic, the offshore territories off West Africa - including those of Ghana, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone - have in recent years become major players in global oil exploration. Since discoveries of huge undersea oil reserves in 2007 off Ghana, in particular, international oil companies, including Exxon and Russian and Chinese state-owned firms, have been flocking to the West African country eager to exploit its newfound natural wealth. More than 50 international oil companies are vying for this equatorial oil bounty, according to the Ghanaian energy ministry.

One of Ghana's major offshore oil prizes is the Jubilee Field, which is estimated to contain reserves equivalent to 1.8 billion barrels (1,800 million barrels). Production from oilrigs off this former British colony is scheduled to begin later this year - for the first time.

Of concern is that Transocean – the operator and owner of the Deepwater Horizon rig contracted by BP – is also the major operator in Ghana’s nascent offshore industry. The New York and Zurich-listed company is the world’s biggest such operator, with over 300 rigs worldwide, according to its website. The company views West Africa as one of its growth areas. [1]

It is now well documented in the case of the Gulf oil spill, which resulted from an explosion on 20 April on Transocean’s Deepwater Horizon rig claiming the lives of 11 workers, that the disaster stemmed from negligence in safety standards and procedures carried out by Transocean. The two main safety shortcomings were the faulty method by which the rig tried to shut off the exploratory wellhead and the failure of a blow-out valve to activate in order to seal the resulting gusher. Not only that, but these systemic dangers in the company’s drilling operations were highlighted over several years by independent engineers and consultants. Both US government officials and the oil industry ignored the warnings, evidently in a rush to maximise profits. [2]

This revolving door relationship between the US government and the oil industry whereby a blind eye was turned on safety regulations, in particular those of Transocean, raise deeply troubling concerns about the risk of an equally disastrous oil spill in the newly opened West African offshore fields.

Sam Danse, who is Oxfam’s country director for Ghana, told BBC World Service (19 May) that he fears international oil companies are using their colossal economic strength to ride roughshod over West African government officials and safety regulations. He cited Transocean in particular with regard to Ghana.

Transocean’s annual profits of over \$4 billion is more than a quarter of Ghana’s gross domestic product and approximately the same as the country’s total debt. That is a lot of leverage on a government of a poor country desperate to get its oil industry up and running as quickly as possible. As Danse pointed out: “If that’s what this company got away with with American industry regulators, what can it get away with those in Ghana?”

To make matters worse, Ghana has already an unenviable reputation for endemic government corruption. The World Bank’s Ease of Doing Business (2010) ranks the country 92nd out of a total of 183. Ordinary Ghanaians often complain that their government ministries are “in the pockets” of foreign investors. Former British deputy high commissioner Craig Murray, who fell foul of his own government in the late 1990s for blowing the whistle on bribery and fraud involving British companies in Ghana, says that the country’s energy sector is particularly prone to corruption.

“The truth is that sadly there was a major increase in corruption in Ghana especially in 2007 and 2008. That was a major reason why the Ghanaian people voted to change their government. But so far there is little indication that the new government has done much to root out the corruption,” says Murray.

If the level of corruption that has been shown in the Gulf of Mexico oil industry is replicated in West Africa’s inexperienced offshore enterprises, then this opens up the possibility of a ticking bomb for a similar oil spill disaster occurring in the South Atlantic. Given that this oceanic region off West Africa drives major ocean currents back to the Americas in a manner countercyclical to the Gulf Stream in the North Atlantic [3] this opens up an appalling vista of a transatlantic triangular catastrophe in oil pollution.

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Notes

1. <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-03-22/transocean-has-25-of-fleet-standing-by-in-s hipyards-update3-.html>
2. <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/may2010/spil-m14.shtml>
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_Ocean

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Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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