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Lebanon Oil Spill May Rival Exxon Valdez of 1989, UN Says

Aug. 8 (Bloomberg) -- Lebanon's oil spill, caused by Israeli bombardment of oil storage units at a power plant, may rival the leakage of the Exxon Valdez in 1989 if left untreated, the United Nations Environment Program said.

"In the worst case scenario, and if all the oil contained in the bombed power plant at Jiyeh leaked into the Mediterranean Sea, the Lebanese oil spill could well rival the Exxon Valdez disaster of 1989," the UN said in an e-mailed statement today.

The spill has yet to be cleaned up or assessed more than three weeks after the bombing of the coastal Jiyeh power plant south of Beirut because of the continuation of hostilities, Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Program, said in the statement.

The spill, which has polluted around two-thirds of the Lebanese coast and spread into neighboring Syria, may threaten East Mediterranean countries such as Cyprus and Turkey, Lebanon's Environment Minister Yacoub Sarraf has said.

About 10,000 tonnes of oil has escaped from the Jiyeh power plant and 35,000 tonnes in total may be spilt, the UN's shipping agency, the International Maritime Organization has said.

"The quantity of oil spilled in Lebanon is already comparable to the disaster caused in 1999 off the coast of France when the Erika tanker spilled an estimated 13,000 metric tonnes of oil into the Atlantic Ocean," the UN Environment Program said.

Marine life, such as sea turtles and Bluefin tuna, has been affected by the spill because the Eastern Mediterranean is a spawning ground for the tuna, the program said.

The Israeli navy has maintained more than three weeks of sea blockade, preventing ships from entering or leaving Lebanese ports without its prior approval.

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