

Drilling platforms not guilty of oil spill, says ministry



Oil is washed up along the public beach at the Red Sea resort of Hurghada, in southern Egypt, on June 23, 2010. (AFP PHOTO/STR)

By **Heba El-Sherif /Daily News Egypt** **June 25, 2010, 5:21 pm**

CAIRO: Waste dumping and residual oil stains on rocks caused the recent oil spill on the Red Sea coast of Hurghada, according to online news portal masrawy.com.

The committee assigned by the Ministry of Petroleum to investigate the source of last week's leakage attributed large quantities of oil in and around Hurghada to periodic waste-dumping by passing boats which, under high temperatures, appeared in larger formations.

Washing oil containers in sea water could have also contributed to the spill, according to the committee's report.

However, according to Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA)'s website, "the spill was from an oil rig approximately 50 nautical miles north of Hurghada."

On Wednesday, June 16, patches of oil appeared along an estimated 30 km of Egypt's Red Sea shoreline, including Hurghada and El Gouna, threatening one of Egypt's main diving destinations and a pivotal source of tourism revenue.

In addition, the spill posed a threat to the surrounding marine life.

As a result, local organizations rallied against the government policy of licensing oil platforms near national parks in the Suez Gulf.

On Tuesday, Minister of Petroleum Sameh Fahmy told the People's Assembly that he is mulling a cut on the number of oil platforms in the Gulf.

"This incident clearly reveals that the oil concessions of the Ministry must be reconsidered especially any concessions near key habitats, protected areas and tourism hotspots," he said.

HEPCA, an NGO that has been working on protecting and preserving the natural resources of the Red Sea since 1992, wrote on its website: "We must continue to push as a community for the protection of our natural environment [sic] we must take a collective stand and clearly state that we shall not allow corruption and greed to destroy our ecosystem, livelihood and health."

Reports throughout last week alleged that Geisum, an oil company whose off-shore platform is located near the area where the oil appeared, caused the spill.

However, the Petroleum Ministry's report maintains that none of Geisum's platforms are responsible for the leak. The report added that all equipment used by the company is in good shape and thus would not have caused a leak.

Environmentalists and government authorities have made conflicting statements on the magnitude of the spill.

An official at the petroleum ministry told Daily News Egypt last week that "the extent of the polluted area has been exaggerated. The leak only occurred in a small area, maybe 30 or 40 barrels [worth of oil appeared]."

However, HEPCA members put the spill at much higher rates.

Meanwhile, sources in Hurghada told Daily News Egypt that tourists wary of the long-term effects of the spill started to cancel their reservations upon reading the news last week, a major blow to one of Egypt's tourism industry.

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