

Capsized ferry in the Philippines. Joint UN/EU assessment report presented to authorities

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The report of the joint UN/EU expert team deployed to assess the situation of the 'Princess of the Stars' ferry that capsized on 21 June – causing nearly 800 deaths, and which contained highly toxic chemicals – was presented today to Philippines authorities. The report confirms the presence of large quantities of five pesticides and other toxic substances, and recommends improvements to water, sediment and air monitoring, and the establishment of a bio-monitoring programme. The report also stresses the need for a comprehensive disposal plan to be in place before the start of any salvage operation.

Vladimir Sakharov, Chief of the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU) said: "This tragic accident underscores, once again, the crucial role of prevention and the importance of preparedness and contingency planning with regard to industrial and technological emergencies, including maritime accidents."

EC Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas said: "I deeply regret the loss of life in this tragic accident and offer my sympathies to the families of the victims. So far, no leakage of chemicals or oil from the wreck has been detected. I hope that the suggestions made by our experts concerning sampling procedures, bio-monitoring and precautionary measures will help ensure that this dreadful tragedy does not also turn into an environmental disaster."

International assistance

The MV Princess of the Stars ferry sank on 21 June 2008 during Typhoon Fengshen, some three kilometres off Sibuyan Island in the central Philippines. Of more than 850 passengers on board, fewer than 60 survived. The ferry was carrying a substantial amount of toxic pesticides and 100,000 litres of fuel for its engines. The Government of the Philippines requested assistance from the United Nations, a request answered by the Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU) and the European Commission through the Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC). The experts have now submitted their findings.

Their report confirms the presence of five pesticides in two different containers on the ferry. One 40-foot container was found to contain only Endosulfan, while another 10-foot container contained four other pesticides: Carbofuran, Propineb, Metamidophos and Niclosamide. The recommendations include improving the monitoring of water, sediment and air, and the establishment of a bio-monitoring programme. Technical advice is also provided on sampling methods and analysis, while further study of prevailing ocean currents is also advised.

The detailed advice will help determine where pollution could occur – in the water, sediment, or air – and whether the products will remain inside the wreck. It will also improve the assessment of the risk to coastal populations.

Planning the salvage

Another key finding underlined the need for a full health and safety plan for the salvage operators, covering all hazards linked to the products on board.

The experts recommended that a complete system for the recovery, storage and elimination or disposal of chemicals should be in place before the start of salvage operations. The Philippine authorities are also invited to establish a government-level contingency plan to enhance their preparations for any possible similar events in the future.

Background on the EU-UN effort

The joint EU-UN assessment team was deployed to the Philippines from 9 to 20 July 2008. The expert team comprised a marine chemist, an eco-toxicologist and a civil protection expert. The mission was supported on-site by the Government of the Philippines, the EU Delegation, and relevant UN agencies in-country – most notably the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The Monitoring and Information Centre (MIC), operated by the European Commission in Brussels, is the operational heart of the Community Mechanism for Civil Protection. It is available on a 24/7 basis. Any country (inside or outside the EU) affected by a major disaster can launch a request for assistance through the MIC. The MIC serves as a communications hub for the exchange of requests and offers of assistance, provides information on civil protection preparedness and response, and supports the coordination of the provision of European assistance.

Further information on the MIC can be found at: <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/civil/prote/mic.htm>

The Joint UNEP/OCHA Environment Unit (JEU) is a collaborative effort between two UN bodies – the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The JEU works with affected countries to identify and mitigate acute negative impacts stemming from emergencies, providing independent, impartial advice and practical solutions. It also works with organisations dedicated to medium and long-term rehabilitation to ensure a seamless transition to the disaster recovery process.

[Final Report of the Joint UN/EU Mission to the Philippines](#)