

LIMBURG - Oil Spill, Yemen, 6th October 2002

On the morning of 6th October 2002 the French tanker LIMBURG (299,364 DWT) suffered an explosion and fire as she approached the SBM at the Ash Shihr terminal in Yemen. Initially the cause of the explosion and subsequent fire was unclear but it is now considered likely to have been the result of a terrorist attack. Damage was sustained to No. 4 Starboard tank, which at the time contained some 13,500 tonnes of Arabian Heavy crude. The vessel had part loaded at Ras Tanura with 54,000 tonnes of crude and was to load the rest of her cargo in Yemen for delivery to Malaysia.

The fire was limited to one tank and continued to burn for two days, consuming the great majority of the tanks' contents, although some was spilled to the sea. Dr Brian Dicks of ITOPF arrived on-site on 8th October, by which time the fire was extinguished and the vessel had been towed offshore. Aerial observations made that day revealed several hundred tonnes of oil residues still afloat on the sea close to the coast, and oil was stranding on shores as a result of onshore winds. Small volumes of oil - most likely oil that had been trapped in the space between the double hulls of the newly built vessel - continued to leak from the damaged area over successive days.



No coherent slicks which would be amenable to containment and recovery were seen after 8th October, and the viscous nature of the burned and weathered oil also meant that it could not be dispersed chemically. As a result, no at-sea response operation was mounted. Over the following days a series of aerial surveillance flights and shore inspections indicated that an estimated 300 tonnes had been spilled. This oil came ashore intermittently along some 120 km of the Yemeni coastline, from just south of the terminal to Al Mukalla, Mayfaa and Bir Ali. By 15th October some scattered patches of oil and sheen remained off the coast between Mayfaa and Bir Ali, but the total quantities involved were estimated to be some 10 tonnes or less and too scattered to merit any attempt at offshore recovery.



Shoreline oiling was patchy, with stretches of a few hundred metres heavily contaminated but elsewhere oiling was light to moderate. Shoreline clean-up was undertaken by a contractor appointed by the Yemeni authorities under the supervision of the Harbour Master of Al Mukalla.

Although Yemen has ratified the 1969 Civil Liability Convention (CLC), a terrorist act is one of the exclusions provided by the Convention. During the last few days of

October 2002, the tanker owner made a payment, without admission of liability, to the Yemeni authorities as a gesture to the Yemeni people. The vessel was then allowed to sail to Fujairah for cargo transhipment and repairs.

(Source : ITOPF web)