

Container Ship Fire Produces Ecological Catastrophe in Sri Lanka

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In the second major container ship accident in Sri Lankan waters in the past year, the X-Press Pearl, which was awaiting entry to Colombo port, caught fire on May 20 after a chemical leak.

All attempts to douse the fire failed and the ship sank about 10 nautical miles off the west coast of Sri Lanka, creating major problems for the environment, fisheries and the health of coastal communities.

Last September, a super tanker—the MV Diamond—caught fire off Sri Lanka’s southeast coast. The blaze raged for days, discharging contaminated water and oil into the sea, before the ship was towed away.

The two incidents demonstrate major safety failures in the global shipping industry and the criminal disregard of the corporations that dominate it, and national governments, for people’s lives and the marine environment.

According to reports, the crew of X-Press Pearl, a Singapore-flagged ship, discovered nitric acid leaking from a container while the vessel was still in the Arabian Sea. They sought permission from Hamad Port in Qatar and Hariza Port in India to offload the problematic container. Both ports rejected the request, saying they lacked the capacity to handle the problem.

The ship’s captain, now in Sri Lankan police custody, claims that Colombo port authorities were informed about the leaking container. Colombo Harbour Master Nirmal Silva said he did not receive any such information, until after the vessel caught fire.

The leaking container had within it 25 tons of nitric acid and other flammable material. It is apparent that the port authorities and the Sri Lankan government were either unable to assess the risk on board or recklessly underestimated it.

Port authorities and the Sri Lankan Navy spent two days trying to douse the fire with sea water and chemical powder during which 23 X-Press Pearl crew members, including two suffering injuries, were rescued. It was clear from the beginning, however, that Sri Lankan authorities had no capacity to deal with the disaster and international assistance took days to arrive.

Salvage workers from the Dutch firm Smit arrived on May 24, five days after the fire started, and Indian Navy support did not come until May 27. When they also failed to extinguish the fire, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse ordered that the ship be tugged out of Sri Lankan waters. This failed after part of the vessel sank and became wedged in the sea-bed, rendering any further movement impossible.



Debris and plastic pellets contaminating Sri Lanka's western coastal beaches (Credit: Marine Environment Protection Authority)

Several containers of small plastic pellets, called nurdles, broke open during the fire, spilling tons of nurdles into the sea and washing up along five kilometres of beaches and tidal areas along the country's western coast. Thousands of dead fish, disfigured turtle and seabird carcasses have been washed ashore, some with visible acid burn marks and nurdles in their respiratory and digestive tracts.

The ship, which had over 1,400 containers on board, has now sunk, along with more than 6,000 tons of nurdles, 500 tons of fuel and lubricant and 6,000 tons of miscellaneous cargo. While photographs show murky plumes leaking from the sinking vessel, it is impossible to determine the exact chemical composition without thoroughgoing analysis.

Leading scientists and environmental activists have warned of a possible massive oil spill and the release of more plastic pellets, both extremely hazardous to coastal life and near-shore fishing in the long and medium term.

As yet, neither X-Press Feeders shipping company nor the Sri Lankan authorities have released a full inventory of the vessel's cargo. If there were large stocks of hazardous chemicals on board, as many environmentalists believe, the wreckage will continue to

contaminate the coastal environment for months, if not years to come.

As Dr. Irushinie Wedage, Sri Lankan director of Parley for the Oceans, warned in an online discussion, Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) and some heavy metals (both found in industrial chemicals), can attach themselves to plastic pellets and organic particles, entering the food chains of fish and crustaceans and leading to seafood contamination.

According to the media, over 4,500 local fishermen have suffered serious and immediate disruption to their livelihoods. Fishing is now banned along the west coast between Negombo and Panadura, impacting on tens of thousands of fishermen. Despite vague promises by the fisheries minister, the government has provided no compensation. Seafood fulfils more than 70 percent of protein needs in Sri Lankan households.

The Global Food Security Program and the National Aquatic Resources Authority have warned of long-term damage on fishing produce from the area. While the social and economic impact of the latest environmental disaster is yet to be assessed, the catastrophe clearly exposes the vulnerability of coastal ecosystems and communities to the hazards of a reckless and profit-hungry global shipping industry.

Several experts have raised potential procedural and technical discrepancies that could have caused the accident, including improper container stacking and inadequate or illegal violations of international fire safety measures. The use of seawater by port authorities to try and suppress the fire has also been highlighted as an aggravating factor.

While these concerns are entirely valid, there are other broader questions. Firstly, the catastrophic delay in mobilising international support to deal with the accident. With timely intervention, the disaster may have been completely averted or considerably mitigated.

Secondly, the incident is another manifestation of the increasing frequency of maritime accidents, especially container ship fires. A report from maritime insurer Gard last November noted that one containerised cargo fire is now happening, on average, every two weeks.

Container shipping volumes have massively grown in the last few decades, a situation further aggravated by disruptions to air and overland haulage caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Global Container Throughput Index, which measures international container traffic, hit a record high last September.

Shipping companies are scrambling to profit from the disruption of the pandemic, putting their own crew and marine environments at risk. A recent report by Nikkei Asia revealed that shipping workers are being dangerously overworked, with more than 400,000 sailors now compelled to labour beyond their 11-month legal limit at sea. Most of them are also confined to their ships, due to quarantine regulations in the ports.

A large share of container traffic today consists of materials and goods transported multiple times across the globe to various cheap labour platforms, based not on what is most efficient, but what is most profitable. Millions of tons of fuel are burnt in this process.

The eco-social risks posed by massive volumes of potentially hazardous cargo, often transported thousands of kilometres in an unsafe manner, are one expression of the insane and damaging reality of contemporary capitalism.

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Featured image: Fire damaged X-Press Pearl just before it sank (Credit: Sri Lankan Air Force)

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