

Title: **The Untold Story**

When an environmental catastrophe threatens a city, it is one scoop private news agencies vie to get their hands on. The oil spill along the Karachi coast is just one such story.

Journalist: **Massoud Ansari**

Nationality: Pakistani

Publication: Newsline

Type of Media: Monthly News Magazine

Date: September 2003

The Untold Story

by **Massoud Ansari**

When an environmental catastrophe threatens a city, it is one scoop private news agencies vie to get their hands on. The oil spill along the Karachi coast is just one such story.

The Tasman Spirit - a Greek-registered, Maltese flag-flying oil tanker - carrying approximately 67,500 tonnes of Iranian crude oil for the PNSC (Pakistan National Shipping Corporation) from the Emirates, bound for the Pakistan State Oil refinery, drifted perilously close to the Karachi harbour, became grounded, and in the process developed cracks along its base. On the eve of August 13, a few hours short of the country's independence day, the tanker split in two and began to disgorge huge amounts of its cargo into the water.

Although the vessel had been grounded since July 27, and repeated requests were made to the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) to take remedial action, the authorities concerned reacted by employing standard operating procedure: putting in place a few token measures and responding to queries about the spill evasively. Law enforcement officials closed the 16-kilometre coastline to the public and around 1,000 police personnel, army jawans and para-military troops, equipped with masks, were deployed to block all the inlets and outlets for vehicular traffic that led to the beach. But by the time concerted action had been initiated to contain the spill and the consequent damages on the environment, it was a case of too little, too late.

If the thick oil slick surrounding the ship, or the odour emanating from it were not evidence enough of the gravity of the situation, the effects of the spill in just two incidents is an eye-opener.

After spending four hours at the Clifton beach in an attempt to examine the causes and effects of the incident, and extracting with major difficulty one-liners from tight-lipped officials involved in the salvage operation finally underway, the crew of a private television channel decided to head back to the studios. They had barely left the beach when the driver of their vehicle began to have violent convulsions and soon thereafter fainted. Rushed to the nearest hospital where he was admitted to the Intensive Care Unit, he remained unconscious and was listed as "critically ill" for 48 hours. The diagnosis: toxic fume inhalation.

Likewise, a photographer belonging to a local NGO, who braved the polluted Clifton shores to take pictures of the grounded vessel, developed severe chest pains and began to vomit. Also transported to a neighbourhood hospital and made to undergo an immediate ECG, he was informed that he too was suffering from exposure to toxic pollutants.

As the fumes from the oil began to envelope the surrounding areas and incidences of asthma, allergies, nausea and conjunctivitis became commonplace among residents of these areas, a sense of panic started to prevail. While many of those who live around the seafront have moved to other parts of the city, others who have no choice but to stay have been compelled to suffer the oppressive atmosphere, with the long-term effects of breathing in the noxious air not even having begun to be ascertained. The human toll aside, there is the fallout on the marine life - in fact, the area's entire eco-system.

It has been estimated that between 24,000 to 26,000 tonnes of oil that are now in the sea have entirely destroyed the area's marine life, and the environment may never recover. The sight of dead fish, lobsters and crabs floating in the oily sea water, is graphic visual evidence of the devastation, but it is just one element of the larger ramifications of the spill. So much for official claims that the leakage was "minor, intermittent and under control," or to hear a KPT official declaring on local television, "The situation is under control; everything will normalise within a week." And despite increasing information about the hazards of the situation, to find the minister of communication and the KPT chief discussing how effective, "the dispersal of 6,000 litres of chemical clearing gas being sprayed with the help of two air-crafts" will be on the crude oil that is currently polluting the waters of the Arabian sea.

What, it turns out, is the worst environmental disaster in Pakistan's history, began when the Tasman Spirit, scheduled to be anchored in the Karachi harbour channel on July 27, became grounded. According to normal procedure, the operations wing of the KPT meets with the general manager operations every day to decide about the berthing of cargo-carrying vessels arriving at the country's biggest port. The timing of the berthing changes daily because it is dependent on the tide, shoring being most conducive at high tide, which in turn depends on the allegories of the moon. Priority is given to deep-loaded vessels, as they have to be berthed at the highest tide of the day. These vessels also have

to be shored at the furthest berths and consequently have to enter the channel first. The bigger ships require tugs to push and manoeuvre them into their berths. The KPT has only four such tugs.

According to the KPT's records, four ships were lined up for berthing on July 27, and the time of high tide that day was recorded at 10.33 a.m. Insiders reveal that two of the four vessels - one carrying freight containers and another oil tanks - were safely brought to the berths assigned to them, but when it was the turn of the Tasman Spirit, Pakistan navy officials demanded that one of their submarines be allowed to berth at the spot assigned for the ship. According to reports, the KPT officials demurred, saying they could not oblige because if the ship was not shored according to schedule, it would miss the high tide, and other ships lined up for shoring would also not be able to be berthed in their assigned spots. However, the navy officials paid no heed, and proceeded to berth their submarine. As a result, the Tasman Spirit could not be docked.

Insiders disclose that if the Tasman Spirit ship had been berthed the following day at the proper time perhaps the disaster could have been averted. However, the harbour master only gave the ship the go-ahead at 1 p.m. when it was not high tide, and assigned a licensed KPT pilot to see to the berthing of the vessel.

Experts on the subject maintain that when the Tasman Spirit, which has about 12 tanks, each containing between 5,000 to 6,000 tonnes of oil, was finally allowed to enter the channel, it was about three hours too late since it had lost the high tide and was about 2.5 metres short of the required depth for berthing. As a result, the vessel became grounded while rounding the breakwater, halfway in the channel bend.

"The harbour master should not have allowed the ship to come in. As a technical expert on the subject, he should have known better. He is largely responsible for the damage," says an expert on the subject. He adds that it is the harbour master's responsibility to ensure that the navigable channels are safe for shipping at all times and to oversee and monitor all shipping movements in the port. "Had there been proper supervision by the operations department, this accident could have been averted," he contends.

Further investigations reveal that one human error was compounded by another. Capt. Abdul Karim Bondrey, who is a master mariner and has served as a pilot and harbour master, also attributes part of the blame to the pilot who brought the ship in. According to him, "When a pilot bringing in the ship misses the tide, he is supposed to seek advice from the harbour master about what course of action to follow. However, the pilot also has to exercise his own judgement about whether to steer a ship in." He adds that the key element is safety. Bondrey maintains that according to international rules, ultimately it is the pilot or captain of the ship who is considered responsible for any accident because he is in command.

Other eyewitness-accounts lend weight to Bondrey's argument. They reveal that when the vessel was entering the channel, it had not gained the sufficient speed or power required to round the bend or turn into the main channel, which is one of the reasons it became grounded. An insider disclosed that the pilot, Nasir Javed, who was one of the key players in the Tasman Spirit debacle, was reportedly involved in at least four other accidents last year, and it was incomprehensible to his colleagues why he had been allowed to continue with his duties given his track record.

Some technical experts meanwhile, point out that since the vessel split within the channel and not outside of it, this indicates that either the channel had not been properly dredged, or the pilot had been provided charts which were erroneous or outdated, which would lay the blame squarely on the hydrographer. "The spot where the vessel became grounded is part of the main channel which we now know has insufficient depth," says an expert. However, he adds that the soundings shown on the chart also appear to be erroneous. "If the soundings were correct," he maintains, "then it means the buoys in the channel were out of position - i.e. they had drifted outside the channel and this lapse had not been discovered."

The matter did not end there. What is shocking is the lack of foresight demonstrated by the concerned authorities. Experts on the subject maintain that anyone with even the slightest knowledge of shipping and ports could have anticipated that if decisive remedial action was not taken, the ship would split. However, KPT officials apparently deluded themselves into believing that the high tide on August 5 would rescue the stranded ship, enabling it to enter the channel. This optimistic evaluation of the situation was borne out by the fact that rather than attempt to set the ship afloat as soon as possible, all the KPT officials did was to despatch crews to the vessel to siphon off as much oil as they could from it to make it lighter so that it could be tugged to deeper waters. Says an expert, "the weather was quite favourable and the tide kept rising. There is no logical explanation for why the concerned officials did not even attempt to refloat the vessel." He also fulminates about how in such a situation standard operating procedure dictates that traffic at an affected port is closed so that all energies are concentrated on the salvage operation. However, there was a free-flow of incoming and outgoing traffic at the Karachi port, despite the enormity of what had occurred.

He cites the fact that the KPT has at least four strong tugboats, which could have pulled the ship out. Alternately he says, with the vessel so close to the shore, it would have been possible to take a flexible pipe out to it from the beach and pump the oil out. The pump operation the KPT finally embarked on to empty the stricken tanker fell, in his view, desperately short of what was required. Expectedly, the slow pace of the operation yielded poor results: only 20,000 tonnes of the 67,500 tonnes of oil the ship was carrying, were pumped out.

Eventually, even this effort had to be abandoned and the crew evacuated from the marooned ship when the cracks in its base widened, and the ship began to buckle. "With action being delayed, and once initiated moving at a snail's pace, the likelihood of the tanker breaking up due to high swells was inevitable," says Capt Karim Bondrey. And once the vessel's forward tanks were ruptured, the oil leakage began in earnest. "Now the vessel is well and truly grounded, with her draft having increased from 12 metres originally to more than 18 metres," he contends.

As the toxic fumes began to spread in the area, aircraft loaded with pollution-control equipment, including booms, were called for from the UK and a C-130 aircraft was brought in from Singapore with 10 tonnes of chemical dispersant. Another dispatch of 250 tonnes of dispersant was also en route to Pakistan. Thereafter, a C-130 craft began spraying dispersant on the affected area, oblivious to the fact it would cause further degradation to marine life. The KPT chairman claimed that the dispersant would help save the marine eco-system and overall environment along the coastal belt. An environmental expert who works for an international environmental agency, however, begs to differ. "As a matter of fact, the chemical spray is even more dangerous than the other pollutants which are coming from the industrial areas. It will adversely affect, if not kill, marine life because it contains deadly chemicals," he says, adding that instead of using chemical dispersants, the concerned authorities should have examined other options like oil-consuming bacteria, which is available in the European market (see following report).

Even as the KPT chairman, Ahmed Hayat claimed that "the worst is now over; there will be no more spillage, and the remaining oil will be unloaded in a 10-15-day operation once the ship's parts have settled in the seabed," news broke on August 22, that the two parts into which the grounded tanker had broken, had finally drifted apart, spilling huge quantities of oil into the sea. According to reports, the two parts of the vessel had remained tenuously linked together for a few days through pipes and metal sheets since after it split into two on August 13, but finally even this link severed due to the rough sea. Consequently, the front portion of the ship got lodged even deeper in the seabed, while its rear portion also began to descend sharply. The ship's oil storage tanks were badly shaken as its rear buckled from the impact of the tide. This resulted in major oil spillage which is ongoing and so far salvage measures are proving inadequate, with the authorities stumped as to how to deal with the situation. "It is now quite certain that the 20,000 tonnes of oil remaining on the ship will empty out into the sea, adding to the miseries of the people who have still not recovered from the effects of the earlier spill," says an observer.

Ironically, even once the news of the leakage broke and effects on both human and marine life became public knowledge, KPT officials continued to waffle about the exact situation. Only on August 21, over a week after the disaster had occurred, did the federal minister for communications, Ahmed Ali, announce officially for the first time that there had been leakage of anywhere from 15,000 to 20,000 tonnes of crude oil. "We are not in a position to declare the exact quantity of oil spillage in the sea as the oil, being lighter than water, floats, so one cannot assess how much oil is remaining and how much has been spilled," said the minister. Ironically, soon after the incident, local newspapers quoted the federal communications minister saying that it was none of their business and the shipping company would handle the situation. And, even as reports of casualties to marine life accompanied by photographs of dead fish littering the beach and floating on the water were being published by newspapers daily, he was heard declaring, on a local television programme, "the Karachi shore is so polluted that it is devoid of any marine life." He meant presumably that there was no danger to marine life since there was no marine life to begin with.

The non-professional attitude of the KPT administration and its under-reporting of the situation can be gauged from the fact that when a delegation from NIPA went to the port for a briefing by one of the organisation's general managers, he responded to a question about the long-term damages to the eco-system by overruling the concerns of environmentalists. "Marine life has the guts and strength to move to safer waters. The spill will not do any damage to these species," he reportedly told the NIPA delegation.

Interestingly, despite the increasing evidence that the disaster owed, at least in major part to KPT functionaries, and all the classification certificates of the Tasman Spirit and other relevant documentation are in order and the ship was declared fit to carry a cargo of 67,500 tonnes, only the 25-man crew of the ship, comprising five Greeks and 20 Philipinos, are being held in custody and are presently under interrogation. "They will have to stay in the country till the inquiry is complete," says the federal communications minister.

A top-level investigation team, headed by the acting principal officer of the mercantile marine department, has been constituted to probe into the matter, ascertain its causes and effects on the environment. According to reports, it will submit its findings directly to General Pervez Musharraf. Inside sources reveal that President Musharraf has also asked the ministry of communications as well as the ministry of petroleum to examine all the possible causes for the catastrophic incident, while expressing his deep anguish over the delay in damage-control efforts.

Meanwhile, KPT chairman Ahmed Hayat, is claiming that they will charge the owners of the vessel for all the damage caused. Legal experts however, say the KPT will be hard put to make such a case. "There is a general rule that ships causing oil spills must bear all the costs connected with the spill, but it has to be conclusively proved that the spill was caused due to the fault of the crew, or that the vessel was overloaded beyond its capacity, or the vessel did not have the required certification to carry such cargo," says a lawyer.

Some local legal experts however, maintain that the KPT authorities might be successful in their bid to seek recourse from the ship's owners if they engage legal eagles of international repute and alongside enlist the aid of various international bodies. "They should try to collect both compensation and cleaning-up costs from various international funds that are available such as the International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund," says a legal expert. The International Oil Pollution Compensation Fund is contributed by the vessel owners' insurers in case of spillage and accident.

Whoever is ultimately found culpable for the vessel being grounded, the question is, why did the KPT authorities take over a week to even begin to attempt to refloat the stranded vessel? To compound their negligence, they tried to hush up the incident. Insiders disclose that all KPT officers and employees were, through an official letter, threatened with serious disciplinary action, if any one of them was found discussing the issue with outsiders. "Not only was a warning letter issued to the employees, but the activities of port intelligence officials were also increased manifold in the port area. They were told to keep a close watch on all the workers and to inform the administration if they detected anyone discussing the issue even within the port premises," says a KPT employee. Reportedly, two KPT employees have been sacked for attending a press conference held by the leader of the KPT Progressive Workers Union, Mr. Shibli, to throw light on and disclose the names of the officials whose negligence led to the Tasmin Spirit disaster.

Ironically, even as Pakistan's worst environmental nightmare was unfolding, the KPT management continued to focus on other activities. All the employees from the lower cadres until Grade-19 were asked to take 'efficiency tests,' during this period, and informed that if they did not make the grade they would be shown the door. Interestingly, the first efficiency test was conducted on August 16, just two days after the oil spillage began. "It is bizarre; the tests should have been postponed and the employees asked to concentrate on devising means to refloat the sinking vessel," says a KPT official.

KPT officials maintain that one of the main reasons for the organisation's mismanagement is the fact that its entire administration has been handed over to members of the armed forces over the last few years. The Karachi Port Trust consists of six divisions, each headed by a general manager. In the past, these positions were held by civilians who had many years of experience at the job and the corresponding expertise. Now alongside other appointments in the KPT of armed forces personnel, five of the organisation's six divisions are also headed by them.

Since these officials took over control of the KPT, they have made various structural changes in the organisation, and are now handling assorted technical assignments. For example, traditionally, the deputy conservator - usually an individual with years of hands-on experience at the job - supervises the process of fixing the timing of the berthing of vessels. However, now, after a reshuffle, it is the general manager (operations) who has been awarded this responsibility. Currently, this post is held by a member of the Pakistan navy, who is considered a rank outsider by KPT employees. Likewise, a professional aviator from the Pakistan navy has been appointed traffic manager of the KPT. This too is a highly technical position. "Assigning these technical jobs to a non-technical person is like asking a car driver to fly an aeroplane," says a senior KPT official.

As a result of the invasion by non-professionals in the KPT in the past few years, many senior KPT officials have availed of the 'golden handshake' scheme and moved on to private corporations.

None of which augurs well for Pakistan's beleaguered shipping industry, its citizens' well-being, or its marine life. Have any lessons been learnt? Judging by official response, none so far.