

UK warns of “catastrophic environmental threat” from hazardous Yemeni oil tanker

The UK warned the UN Security Council today 15th July that the FSO SAFER oil tanker, which has 1.14 million barrels of crude oil on board, poses a devastating threat to the environment. Its poor condition means it is now close to leaking millions of gallons of oil into the Red Sea.

The tanker is moored in Houthi-held territory off the west coast of Yemen, and the UN is seeking access for a mission to assess the tanker’s condition, conduct any possible urgent repairs, and make recommendations for the safe extraction of the oil.

The tanker has the potential to cause an oil spill four times larger than the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989, which involved 257,000 barrels of oil and the effects of which are still being observed over 30 years later.

It would cause unprecedented damage to the surrounding Red Sea marine environment which is home to over 1200 species of fish, of which 10 per cent are only found in the Red Sea. Any spill would also devastate the livelihoods of nearly four million people, with fishing stocks taking 25 years to recover. It would close the vital port of Al Hodeidah for up to six months and cost up to £16 billion to clean up.

If there was a spill, it would make responding to the already challenging humanitarian situation in Yemen even more difficult.

Minister for the Middle East, James Cleverly, said:

The FSO SAFER oil tanker is an environmental disaster waiting to happen and unless UN experts are allowed to access it, we are facing a catastrophic environmental threat.

The Houthis cannot continue to hold the environment and people’s livelihoods to ransom. It is in everyone’s interests, especially the suffering people of Yemen, that this tanker is made safe immediately.

We will continue to use our seat on the UN Security Council to do all we can to stand up for and protect the Yemeni people.

Yemen is suffering from the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, with 24 million people – a staggering 80% of the population – in need of humanitarian assistance. This devastating situation is now being compounded by the rapid spread of coronavirus, with UK-funded modelling estimating that Yemen has already had over one million infections.

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