

# Oil slick ship ran aground as captain 'cut corner'

October 15 2011, by Erica Berenstein

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This handout photo taken and released by the New Zealand Defence Force on October 12, 2011 shows the grounded container ship *Rena* listing heavily to starboard in the Bay of Plenty near Tauranga. The vessel ran aground because the captain was taking a short cut, the New Zealand government alleged Saturday.

The vessel at the centre of New Zealand's worst maritime pollution disaster ran aground because the captain was taking a short cut, the New Zealand government alleged Saturday.

The accusation was made as salvage crews prepared to pump [oil](#) from the stricken [cargo ship](#) *Rena*, which ran aground last week.

Anger is mounting in New Zealand over the fuel leak, with popular beaches on the North Island's east coast coated in oil and off-limits to the public, and more than 1,000 dead and oil-soaked birds recovered.

There were indications Saturday the leak has been stemmed, but the ship's agent has said the six Filipino crewmembers who are still in New Zealand are being kept at an undisclosed location amid fears for their safety.

Environment Minister Nick Smith said it appeared the Rena hit a reef off the resort area of Tauranga when the vessel was trying to get to port quickly.

"I can't confirm that. But it appears from the charts that they were in a rush to get to port, went full bore, cut the corner, and hit the reef," Smith told TV3's The Nation programme.

The ship's captain and the officer on navigational watch when the ship ran aground have already been charged with operating a vessel in a manner causing unnecessary danger or risk.

The charge carries a maximum penalty of one year in jail.

Meanwhile, Maritime New Zealand (MNZ) on-scene commander Nick Quinn said the Rena was now stable and the stern had settled on a reef.

"There are no reports of fresh oil leaking," he said as observation flights continued to monitor the situation from the air.

Quinn said salvage teams were on board the [cargo vessel](#) "working in very difficult and potentially [hazardous conditions](#)" to install fuel pumping equipment.

They hoped to begin discharging oil into a waiting tanker by the end of the day.

It is believed there are still 1,346 tonnes of oil on board the Rena while

about 330 tonnes have leaked into the ocean in an ecologically sensitive area teeming with wildlife, with 88 containers also falling into the water.

Matthew Watson from the salvage company Svitzer told Radio New Zealand a team on a fuel pumping barge half a nautical mile away had been testing equipment to remove the remaining oil.

Their main difficulty was finding a way to heat the fuel, which has cooled to a dense consistency and the ship's engines no longer have the power to warm it, he said.

On shore, nearly 1,000 dead birds have been recovered and a wildlife facility is caring for 110 injured birds.

Compared with some of the world's worst oil spills, the disaster remains small -- the Exxon Valdez which ran aground in 1989 in Alaska dumped 37,000 tonnes of oil into Prince William Sound.

But it is significant because of the pristine nature of New Zealand's Bay of Plenty, which contains marine reserves and wetlands and teems with wildlife including whales, dolphins, penguins, seals and rare sea birds.

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