

Mystery oil spills blot more than 130 Brazilian beaches

October 8 2019, by Louis Genot



A barrel of oil leaking on a beach in Barra dos Coqueiros, in the Brazilian state of Sergipe

The source of large blots of oil staining more than 130 beaches in northeastern Brazil remained a mystery Tuesday despite President Jair Bolsonaro's assertions they came from outside the country and were possibly the work of criminals.

Tamar, a group dedicated to the protection of sea turtles, said the oil spills were "the worst environmental tragedy" it has encountered since its formation in 1980.

The patches of oil began appearing in early September and have now turned up along a 2,000 kilometer (1,200 mile) stretch of Atlantic coastline.

"We are not in the presence of a constant leak. If it is the result of a shipwrecked oil tanker, the leaks will continue for the moment," Bolsonaro told a news conference in Brasilia.

"It appears to be criminal. This oil could have been dumped at sea."

Environment Minister Ricardo Salles, appearing alongside Bolsonaro, said the government's priority is "to act quickly to remove what is on land and to deepen the investigation to find the origin."

On Monday, Salles said after visiting the affected areas that more than 100 tonnes of oil has been removed from the beaches in the northeast.

State oil company Petrobras, which is taking part in the cleanup, said its analysis determined that the oil was neither produced nor marketed by the company.

The patches of oil have been detected in all nine states of northeastern Brazil, a poor region known for the beauty of its beaches and whose economy depends on tourism.

"The coastal ecosystem of northeastern Brazil is very fragile, with mangroves, rocky coves and coral reefs," Maria Christina Araujo, an oceanographer at Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, told AFP.

"In the mangrove, an environment with exceptional biodiversity, it is virtually impossible to remove oil. The damage could be irreparable and the ecosystems will take years to recover."

She also warned that the spills could harm the region's economy.

"We can already see that tourists no longer want to go to the beaches," Araujo said.

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