

Mauritius declares emergency as stranded ship spills fuel

August 8 2020, by Cara Anna



In this satellite image provided by 2020 Maxar Technologies on Friday, Aug. 7, 2020, an aerial view of the MV Wakashio, a bulk carrier ship that recently ran aground off the southeast coast of Mauritius. The prime minister of Mauritius says the government is appealing to France for help with a brewing environmental disaster after a ship that ran aground almost two weeks ago off the Indian Ocean island nation began leaking oil. Prime Minister Pravind

Jugnauth said Friday that the leak "represents a danger for Mauritius" and that his country doesn't have the skills and expertise to refloat stranded ships. (2020 Maxar Technologies. via AP)

The Indian Ocean island of Mauritius has declared a "state of environmental emergency" after a Japanese-owned ship that ran aground offshore days ago began spilling tons of fuel.

Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth announced the development late Friday as satellite images showed a dark slick spreading in the turquoise waters near environmental areas that the government called "very sensitive."

Mauritius has said the ship was carrying nearly 4,000 tons of fuel and cracks have appeared in its hull.

Jugnauth said his government had appealed to France for help, saying the spill "represents a danger" for the country of some 1.3 million people that relies heavily on tourism and has been hit hard by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Our country doesn't have the skills and expertise to refloat stranded ships," he said. Bad weather has made it impossible to act, and "I worry what could happen Sunday when the weather deteriorates."

Jugnauth shared a photo of the vessel, the MV Wakashio, tilted precariously. "Sea rough beyond the reefs with swells. Ventures in the open seas are not advised," according to the Mauritius Meteorological Services.

Videos posted online showed oily waters lapping at the shore, and a man running a stick across the water's surface and lifting it, dripping black

goo.



In this satellite image provided by 2020 Maxar Technologies on Friday, Aug. 7, 2020, an aerial view of oil leaking from the MV Wakashio, a bulk carrier ship that recently ran aground off the southeast coast of Mauritius. The prime minister of Mauritius says the government is appealing to France for help with a brewing environmental disaster after a ship that ran aground almost two weeks ago off the Indian Ocean island nation began leaking oil. Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth said Friday that the leak "represents a danger for Mauritius" and that his country doesn't have the skills and expertise to refloat stranded ships. (2020 Maxar Technologies via AP)

The French island of Reunion is the closest neighbor to Mauritius, and France's Foreign Ministry says France is Mauritius's "leading foreign investor" and one of its largest trading partners.

"When biodiversity is in peril, there is urgency to act," French President Emmanuel Macron tweeted Saturday. "France is there. Alongside the people of Mauritius. You can count on our support dear Jugnauth."

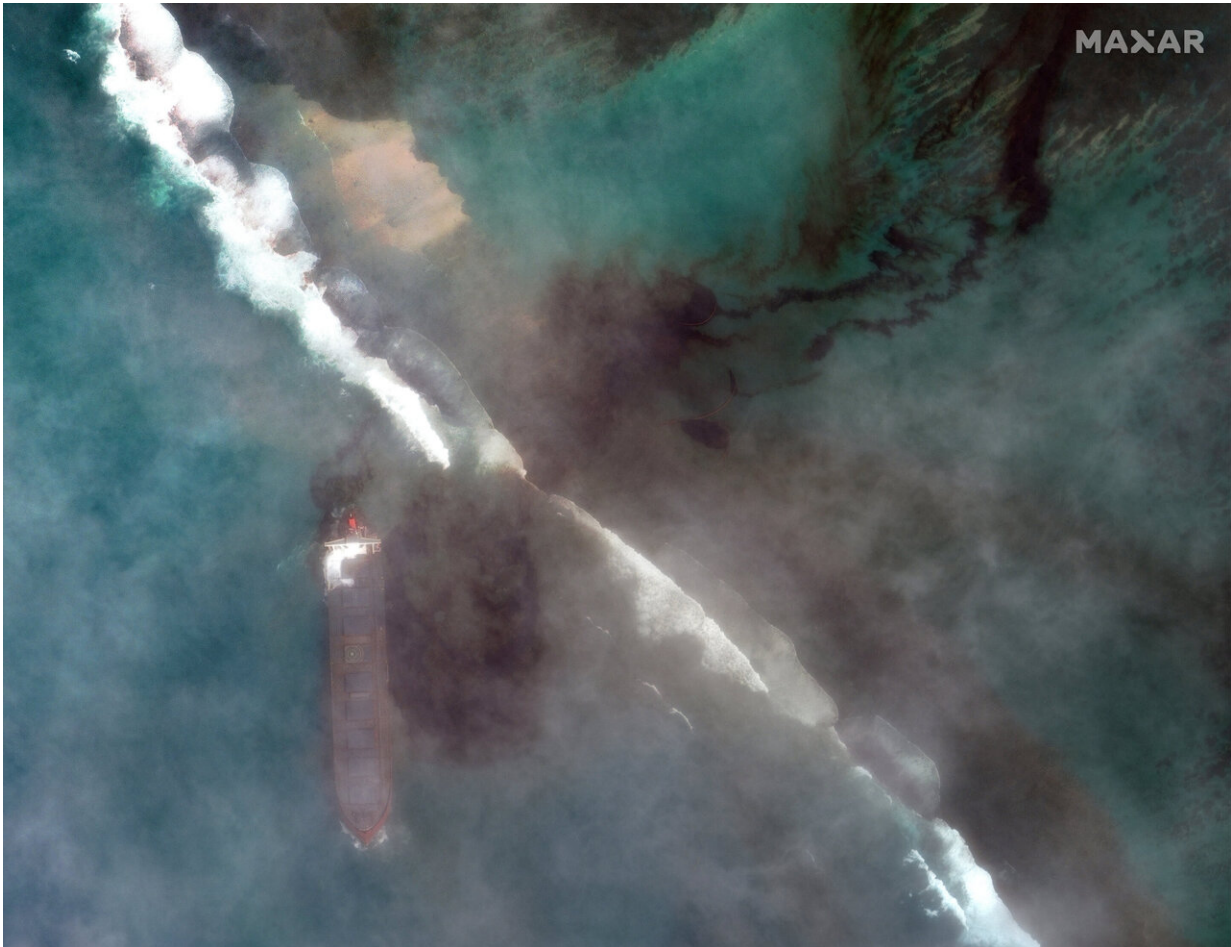
A separate French statement from Reunion said a military transport aircraft would carry pollution control equipment to Mauritius and a navy vessel with additional material would set sail for the island nation.

"We are in a situation of environmental crisis," the environment minister of Mauritius, Kavy Ramano, has said.

After the cracks in the hull were detected, a salvage team that had been working on the ship was evacuated, Ramano told reporters Thursday. Some 400 sea booms were deployed in an effort to contain the spill.

Government statements in recent days said the ship ran aground July 25 and the National Coast Guard received no distress call. The ship's owners were listed as the Japanese companies Okiyo Maritime Corporation and Nagashiki Shipping Co. Ltd.

A police inquiry has been opened into issues such as possible negligence, one statement said. Online ship trackers showed the Panama-flagged bulk carrier had been en route from China to Brazil.



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A statement by Nagashiki Shipping Co. Ltd. said that "due to the bad weather and constant pounding over the past few days, the starboard side

bunker tank of the vessel has been breached and an amount of fuel oil has escaped into the sea."

It added: "Nagashiki Shipping takes its environmental responsibilities extremely seriously and will take every effort with partner agencies and contractors to protect the marine environment and prevent further pollution."

Tons of diesel and oil are now leaking into the water, environmental group Greenpeace Africa's climate and energy manager Happy Khambule said in a statement.

"Thousands of species around the pristine lagoons of Blue Bay, Pointe d'Esny and Mahebourg are at risk of drowning in a sea of pollution, with dire consequences for Mauritius' economy, food security and health," Khambule said.

A government environmental outlook released nearly a decade ago said Mauritius had a National Oil Spill Contingency Plan but equipment on hand was "adequate to deal with oil spills of less than 10 metric tonnes."

In case of major spills, it said, assistance could be obtained from other Indian Ocean countries or from international oil spill response organizations.

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