

# Briefing on Ongoing Environmental Emergencies for the Geneva Environmental Network (GEN)

As part of the UN's overall response to the Beirut blast, an Environmental Emergencies Coordination Cell was established. Margherita Fanchiotti (left) from the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit was deployed rapidly to the Environmental Cell to coordinate international environmental response to the explosion.



The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Joint Environment Unit of the UN Environment Programme and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit) are working around the world to respond to the environmental impacts of COVID-19, disasters, and conflicts.

This briefing note offers background information for the forthcoming environmental emergencies webinar organized within the framework of the Geneva Environment Network (GEN), to be held on 8 September 2020. This note introduces the key elements of three environmental emergencies currently faced by the international community, and outlines UNEP's responses:

1. Environmental challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic;
2. Environmental risks of the Beirut explosion;
3. Oil spill in Mauritius from MV Wakashio.

The webinar will take the form of a dynamic exchange between environmental experts, a number of Member States and a group of humanitarian experts. There will be a Q&A session at the end of each presentation.

8 September 2020

# COVID-19 Pandemic

## Environmental Challenges

Since the beginning of 2020, the crisis precipitated by the spread of COVID-19 has engulfed all UN Member States and other countries and territories. While COVID-19 is primarily a health emergency, it poses several environmental challenges and opportunities to national and local authorities at different stages, ranging from crisis management to recovery. One of the most immediate challenges that needs to be addressed is how to manage and dispose of the waste produced in healthcare facilities. UNEP has identified six major COVID-19-linked environmental challenges – both immediate and more long-term, including:

1. Ensuring sound management of infectious waste;
2. Maintaining sound waste management and sanitation services in urban settings;
3. Avoiding negative impacts from humanitarian action;
4. Avoiding unsustainable land conversion;
5. Ensuring continued management of protected natural areas;
6. Maintaining climate change action and sustainable development efforts.



## UNEP's Engagement

UNEP started developing a strategy to support its Member States as soon as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020. Together with other UN agencies, UNEP is supporting the UN Member States and territories to address the environmental dimensions of crises, including the long-standing UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit. It can assist – and has assisted – in assessing and advising on COVID-19-related waste management at the country level.

Since the onset of the pandemic, UNEP has deployed experts to several Member States to provide technical assistance on a range of services, including healthcare waste management and post-COVID-19 environmental needs assessment. Meanwhile, UNEP has also been coordinating with its global partners to conduct a global and regional webinar series to provide training for experts on COVID-19-linked healthcare waste management.

Within UNEP, our Crisis Management Branch and UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit have been supporting countries that requested COVID-19-related environmental assistance. These include: South Africa, India, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Haiti, Sudan, South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Nigeria. Yet the COVID-19 global pandemic is far from over. Countries that successfully managed the first wave of infections are now grappling with a resurgence of transmission and infections. Furthermore, not all countries are equally prepared to cope with the health and environmental dimensions of COVID-19.

This briefing will present UNEP's work to support Member States and what and how UNEP can do to further engage in the COVID-19 emergency response.

# Oil Spill in Mauritius

## Environmental Sensitivity

On 25 July 2020, the bulk carrier vessel, MV Wakashio, ran aground on the Pointe d'Esny reefs, off the coast of Mauritius. The vessel was carrying nearly 4,200 metric tons of fuel. The ship became stranded near ecologically sensitive areas, including the Pointe d'Esny Wetlands, Ile aux Aigrettes Nature Reserve, Blue Bay Marine Area, Mahebourg Fishing Reserves, barachois (coastal lagoons), and mangroves. These specific areas have been designated as a site of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

At least 1,000 metric tons of oil from the vessel are estimated to have leaked into the sea and along the coastline. Pumping operations were organized to discharge over 2,000 metric tons of the remaining oil from the vessel. Clean-up operations are undergoing along the shoreline to remove oil that arrived on the coast but the spill has already endangered coral reefs, fish, and other marine life – ecosystems already under pressure from climate-induced ocean warming.

On 6 August, the Republic of Mauritius put out a request for international assistance, including equipment and experts in oil spills, pollution monitoring, environment protection and evaluation of damage to the environment.



A team of UN experts were deployed to Mauritius on 11 August to assess and respond to the environmental consequences of the incident. One expert from UNEP is still on the ground to further provide his expertise.

## UNEP's Engagement

UNEP, along with other international organizations, mobilized rapidly upon the request from the Government of Mauritius. UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit, working with the International Maritime Organization (IMO), immediately identified and deployed an oil spill management expert on 11 August. The expert is still on the ground contributing as part of a team of UN experts to assess and respond to the environmental consequences of the incident.

Following expeditious progress made by the salvage companies to evacuate the remaining oil from the ship, the response has now shifted to a clean-up of the contaminated areas and an assessment of both ecosystem and economic damage. UNEP continues to support the Government of Mauritius in undertaking this work. Our technical expert has been requested by the Government to extend his stay to further provide his expertise on the assessment and strategy development.

Details and updates about the environmental consequences of the oil spill and UNEP's responses to the assessment and clean-up work will be presented during the briefing.

# Explosion in Port of Beirut

## Environmental Impacts

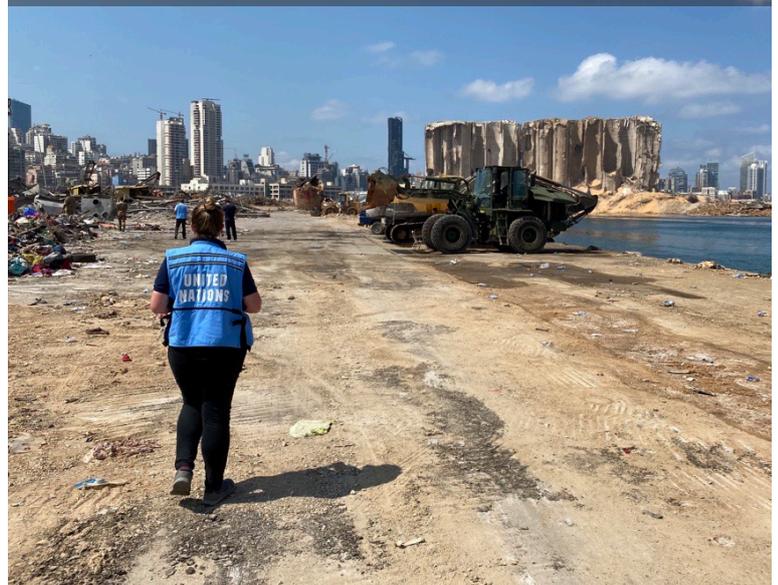
On 4 August, nearly 3,000 metric tons of ammonium nitrate released toxic gases in Lebanon's capital, Beirut. The massive explosions in the city's port reverberated across the city, resulting in over 180 lives lost, more than 6,500 people injured, and around 300,000 people displaced. The devastating impact of the blast adds to the immense pressure of COVID-19, which comes on top of the economic crisis gripping the country and of the impact of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon.

Tens of thousands of buildings have been damaged or destroyed – many located far away from the center of the explosion. Massive quantities of debris were produced, including toxic dust and the likely presence of asbestos which were also pushed into the atmosphere, exposing large sections of the city's population to health risks. Soil and groundwater contamination is also expected from the range of chemicals released into the surrounding environment. The blast produced multiple layers of negative environmental impacts.

## UNEP's Engagement

At the request of the UN Resident Coordinator, a United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) team was deployed to coordinate the international response in support of national efforts. The team embedded a staff member from the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit to help contain and reverse the impacts described above. An Environmental Emergencies Coordination Cell was set up and headed by the UNEP expert to coordinate all environment-related action. The UNEP expert assumed the critical role of coordinating national and international experts on the ground to leverage expertise, rapidly identify, assess, and mitigate acute environmental risks, and promote the early integration of environmental considerations in humanitarian assessments and overall response efforts.

Margherita Fanchiotti from the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit was deployed rapidly to the Environmental Cell to coordinate international environmental response to the explosion.



At present, the chemical substances found at the port during the immediate response phase have been mapped. Advice on rapid mitigation of related acute environmental risks was provided in real-time and actioned, to prevent cascading negative humanitarian and environmental impacts. Training on dealing with asbestos and other hazardous waste during ongoing clean-up operations was provided to environmental NGOs to raise awareness. Preliminary findings from the immediate response phase have informed the development of a comprehensive disaster waste management strategy under the leadership of the Ministry of Environment, for which funding has been secured from the European Union.

Environmental considerations were visibly anchored in the Flash Appeal which was issued in the immediate aftermath of the emergency as well as into the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment prepared in collaboration with other UN agencies, the World Bank, and the European Union. The latter relies on data collected by the Government, humanitarian partners, UN agencies, NGOs, and academia. It has been augmented by high resolution satellite imagery analysis and social media analytics.

Details of the explosion and its environmental impacts, as well as key findings of the early assessment, will be presented at the briefing.