

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses the threat of an oil spill in the Red Sea and invites your thoughts on the subject.

Last year's explosion in the Port of Beirut – when nearly 3,000 tonnes of unsafely stored ammonium nitrate exploded into a mushroom cloud – should serve as a tragic reminder of the cost of inaction. Yet here we are sleepwalking into another catastrophe. This time, it's a ticking time bomb in the Red Sea.

A 350m-long, 70m-wide rusting oil tanker, anchored 9km off the coast of Yemen at Ras Isa, is an ecological disaster waiting to happen. Originally built in Japan, in 1976, the tanker was bought by the Yemeni government 10 years later, to be converted into a stationary Floating Storage and Offloading Unit (FSO).

The so-called FSO *Safer* (if ever there was an ironic name...) had been receiving, storing and redistributing crude oil flowing from Yemen's oil fields. But since the devastating Yemeni Civil War began in late 2014 – mainly between the Yemeni government (backed by a Saudi-led coalition of Arab states) and Houthi political rebels – all operations have stopped.

Loaded with an estimated 1.148 million barrels of crude oil (more than four times the amount spilled by the *Exxon Valdez* in Alaska in 1989), the vessel was seized by the Houthis in 2015. After years of neglect, it's now in a deteriorating state of disrepair. It sprang a major leak last May, for example, when seawater poured into the engine room – it has since been patched, temporarily, but no one knows how long the patch will hold.

It's just a matter of time before oil from all 34 of the tanker's storage tanks spills into the sea or,

worse, there is a monumental explosion from the build-up of flammable gases.

The *Safer* couldn't be in a worse place for an oil spill. The Red Sea's coral reefs – rated by the UN as one of the most important areas of biodiversity on the planet – would be damaged beyond repair. It would also exacerbate Yemen's humanitarian crisis, hitting tens of thousands of families who rely on fishing for a living, gumming up desalination plants supplying drinking water, and disrupting humanitarian aid (the tanker is anchored about 60km north of the rebel-held port of Hudaydah, which is critical for the delivery of vital aid to millions of Yemenis).

A significant spill would heavily impact Djibouti, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia

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and other neighbouring countries, too. In short, it would be one of the worst ecological disasters the world has ever seen.

The UN has repeatedly called for action. In late 2020, after months of negotiation, Houthi leaders agreed – at least, in principle – to allow a team of UN inspectors to visit the stricken tanker sometime this year, to assess its sorry state. But a previous agreement collapsed when Houthi leaders changed their minds the night before. And, anyway, vital though an assessment may be, it still wouldn't eliminate the threat of a spill.

Efforts have been complicated by a dispute over the oil itself, which was recently valued at US\$60 million. The UN wants to divide the proceeds between the Houthis and the Yemeni government, but the Houthis want permission to sell it all themselves – and are using the ship as a bargaining chip. That does at least mean that, given the right 'ransom', the UN might be able to buy a solution.

Some losses, after all, are priceless. Preventing an imminent oil spill has to be top priority. But we also need to prepare for the worst-case scenario – dealing with a major spill – to ensure a rapid and co-ordinated response.

Oil spills usually come as a surprise, so this is the most advanced warning we have ever had. We squander it at our peril. 🐟

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Red Sea coral reefs are hugely important areas of biodiversity.