



# UN TO BEGIN SHIP-TO-SHIP OIL TRANSFER TO PREVENT CATASTROPHE IN THE RED SEA

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*After almost two years of political groundwork, fundraising and project development, the UN-led operation to prevent a massive oil spill in the Red Sea from the decaying FSO Safer supertanker began on 30 May, with the arrival on-site of a leading maritime salvage company's vessel. The work to prepare the 47-year-old Safer for the offloading of more than one million barrels of oil has progressed well. The Safer has been stabilized for the ship-to-ship transfer of the oil.*

*The replacement vessel Nautica is expected to sail imminently from Djibouti to the Safer site to receive the oil. But even after the oil transfer, the Safer will pose a residual environmental threat. To finish the work the UN has started, an additional \$22 million is required. The UN counts on additional generous support to close the remaining budget gap.*

## Background

Constructed in 1976 as a supertanker and converted a decade later to be a floating storage and offloading facility (FSO) for oil, the *Safer* is moored about 4.8 nautical miles off the coast of Hodeidah Governorate in Yemen. The vessel holds an estimated 1.14 million barrels of oil.

Production, offloading and maintenance operations on the *Safer* were suspended in 2015 because of the war in Yemen. The vessel's structural integrity significantly deteriorated, putting it at risk of breaking apart. The systems required to pump inert gas into its tanks ceased functioning in 2017, resulting in a serious risk of explosion. The vessel is beyond repair. A significant spill would surpass national capacity and resources to respond effectively.

## The costs of a major oil spill

The cost of cleanup is estimated at \$20 billion. A major spill would devastate fishing communities on Yemen's Red Sea coast. Half a million people working in the fishing industry in the area have 1.7 million dependents. Two hundred thousand livelihoods could be instantly wiped out. Whole communities would be exposed to life-threatening toxins.

A major oil spill could close the nearby ports of Hodeidah and Saleef – which bring food, fuel and life-saving supplies into a country where 17 million people need food assistance.

The environmental impact on water, coral reefs, life-supporting mangroves and other sea life would be severe. Oil could reach the shores of Saudi Arabia, Eritrea, Djibouti and Somalia.

Desalination plants on the Red Sea coast could be closed, cutting off a water source for millions of people. The spill would produce highly polluted air over a large area.

Vital shipping through the Bab al-Mandab Strait to the Suez Canal could be disrupted for an extended period, costing billions of dollars per day. Tourism would suffer.

## UN-coordinated plan to resolve the threat

Following earlier UN efforts to address the threat from the *Safer* in the highly politicized environment of the conflict, the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Yemen, David Gressly, began building on a new private-sector initiative in mid-2021. First put forward by the Fahem Group, the initiative called for a leading maritime salvage company to transfer the oil off the *Safer* and replace the decaying supertanker's capacity.

In September 2021, United Nations senior management instructed Gressly to provide UN system-wide leadership on the *Safer* and coordinate all efforts to address the threat. After discussions with relevant stakeholders, a draft UN-coordinated plan was put forward and strongly supported by UN senior management in December 2021.



The FSO Safer, at left, with the Ndeavor, 2023. Credit: Boskalis

Since then, the UN has engaged closely with the Government of Yemen in Aden, which has maintained support for the initiative, including by providing a \$5 million donation last year.

The Sana'a-based authorities, who control the area where the vessel is located, signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the UN on 5 March 2022, establishing a framework for cooperation in which they committed to facilitating the project's success.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is implementing the complex project, which comprises:

- A world leading global salvage company inspecting the FSO *Safer* and making it safe for the operation, transferring the oil into a replacement vessel, and readying the vessel to be towed away; and
- The installation of a catenary anchor leg mooring (CALM) buoy to which the replacement VLCC will be connected as safe long-term replacement capacity, and the towing and scrapping of the *Safer*.

Preparatory work began in late 2022. UNDP put in place world-renowned technical expertise, including a marine management consultancy firm, maritime legal firm, insurance and ship brokers, and oil spill experts.

In March, UNDP entered into agreement with Euronav to purchase the replacement vessel, which was subsequently modified for the operation. In April, contracting of the Boskalis subsidiary SMIT Salvage was completed.

### *Work to prevent the spill has progressed well*

On 30 May, the salvage vessel *Ndeavor* reached the *Safer* site to begin the operation. The crew on the *Safer* has cooperated closely with the salvage team, while the Safer Technical Committee in Hodeidah has provided access, security and technical support and has maintained a high level of coordination and cooperation with the UN operational team in Hodeidah and the salvage team.

The SMIT team has done everything possible to stabilize the 47-year-old vessel and prepare it for the removal of the oil, including:

- Thorough structural assessments of the hull, which

confirmed that hull thickness levels are sufficient to withstand forces generated during the oil transfer;

- Pumping inert gas into the oil cargo tanks to significantly reduce the risks of fire or explosion and continuous testing to ensure the atmosphere remains at a safe level;
- Preparation of portable transfer pumps and rigging of hoses and valves and repairs of the *Safer's* manifold through which the oil will flow during the operation;
- Prepositioning of oil spill response equipment.

The *Safer* is ready for the ship-to-ship transfer of the oil.

On 10 July 2023, the Sana'a authorities provided authorization for the oil transfer. The replacement vessel *Nautica* is expected to sail from Djibouti to the *Safer* site imminently to take on the oil.

UNDP, the UN Environment Programme and the International Maritime Organization have secured high-level expertise to monitor the work and support Yemeni efforts in the event of any incident during the operation. The World Food Programme, UNFPA, UN Department of Safety and Security and UN Mission for the Hudaydah Agreement have also provided expertise or operational support on the ground.

### *Further support needed to finish the job*

The oil transfer will prevent the worst-case scenario: a catastrophic spill four times greater than the *Exxon Valdez*. However, even after the transfer, the decaying *Safer* will pose a residual environmental threat, holding viscous oil residue and remaining at risk of breaking apart.

To finish the work, \$22 million is required, including to repay the \$20 million that the UN Central Emergency Response Fund provided in internal bridging finance to ensure sufficient liquidity to start the operation.

To date, generous member states, the private sector and the global public have provided \$121 million in contributions and pledges. Other partners have advocated over the years to address the threat or provided in-kind donations. The UN is counting on further generous support to finish this critical mission without delay.

## *The revised budget for the plan reflects current market conditions*

As outlined in the UN's initial plan in April 2022, the budget for the operation was \$144 million. While the adoption of the CALM buoy solution initially lowered the estimated budget, the rising prices of VLCCs and other factors pushed the working budget higher. The current budget is \$143 million. **The current budget gap is \$22 million.**

### *The United Nations thanks donors for the generous support*



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