

Interspill abstract submission

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Hot topics/Case study – *Gulfstream*, Trinidad & Tobago – Getting to the root of a complex incident

In early February 2024, an unmanned articulated tank barge, known as *Gulfstream*, being towed by a tug (*Solo Creed*), sank and capsized off the coast of Tobago.

The tug immediately turned off its AIS and fled the scene without raising the alarm. The oil spilling from the wreck impacted some 15km of the coastline of Tobago, as well as Bonaire, almost 800 km away, causing economic losses and other damages. The IOPC Funds has been working with the authorities from the outset and is now paying claims for compensation, at present without the traditional first tier of compensation being paid for by the shipowner/insurer. However, this is not a typical case. Investigations into the ownership of the vessel have uncovered a multitude of irregularities in its movements and activities long before the February incident. Furthermore, it appears that whoever was behind the trade was planning to change the name of the barge before delivery of the oil took place at its destination, believed to be Guyana.

Investigations revealed the barge to be some 46 years old. The barge was not insured, not in class, not flagged and certainly not seaworthy. Clearly, the vessel should not have been permitted to sail by port authorities, in that condition.

It is believed that the barge had picked up a cargo of oil from Venezuela in late January, destined for Guyana. Following the incident, satellite footage was discovered showing that the vessel had apparently began leaking oil, the moment it picked up that cargo.

When it was discovered that the tug had fled the scene, an international search began for its whereabouts. Months later, it was discovered that the Angolan authorities had arrested the tug for breaching the boundaries of a number of oil fields off its coast. The tug had crossed the Atlantic attempting to flee the scene of the barge sinking.

The authorities in Trinidad & Tobago instructed lawyers to advise on the necessary steps to re-arrest the tug for the breaches conducted in Trinidad & Tobago waters, and to ascertain further information upon the true owner of the tug, and the owner of the barge.

The assistance of neighbouring States, maritime authorities and the use of open source information have helped the IOPC Funds begin to get to the root of this complex incident. An interesting story by itself, but also an unfortunate example of how the flouting of regulations can lead to serious oil pollution damage, with significant consequences on the environment, on livelihoods and on how the international system established to minimise the impact of such pollution is applied.

The IOPC Funds have committed to paying compensation in this incident and has started receiving claims, but the investigations continue to uncover further layers of complexity.