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Lessons learnt from recent incidents in France and abroad

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Abstract

From 2018 to 2021, Cedre attended a number of incidents in France and abroad, involving oil, chemicals and plastic pellets.

Two significant incidents happened at sea.

In October 2018, ro-ro vessel Ulysse, bound for Radès (Tunis), rammed into the starboard side of unladen container ship CSL Virginia, at anchor around 15 nautical miles north of Cap Corse. Some 550 m³ of Heavy Fuel Oil were spilled at sea. Despite significant effort at sea and assistance from Italy and EMSA, oil reached the shoreline of the French Riviera. This incident demonstrated, once again, that a spill of limited quantities of oil can affect a significant length of shoreline and lead to long-term clean-up operations. These operations were made harder by the large amounts of debris on some beaches and the difficulty to access some sites.

In 2019, the sinking of roll-on/roll-off container ship Grande America represented yet another challenge, as spills drifted in the Bay of Biscay, resulting in response operations and the involvement of the Drift Committee during three weeks. This committee, led by Cedre and including Météo-France (French weather bureau), Ifremer (French oceanic institute) and SHOM (French Navy hydrographic department), analysed surveillance data, carried out drift forecast and produced daily maps and reports. The ship was also carrying chemicals in containers.

Also in 2019, a huge fire affected the facilities of a chemical plant in Normandy. The fire and response operations generated a spill of varied substances into the river Seine in Rouen. Uncertainties regarding the nature of the pollutants, tidal range in the area as well as complexity of harbour infrastructure and amounts of debris in the area made response operations especially challenging.

Smaller incidents in France (pipeline failure near Paris, discovery of oil from the Erika, mystery spill in Corsica) resulted in limited spills but strong reaction from the general public and the media and, in the end, a very significant mobilization of Cedre's staff and equipment.

Cedre was also deployed, first to La Réunion then to Mauritius (in the framework of regional cooperation) following the grounding of bulk carrier Wakashio, which resulted in the spillage of some 800 m³ of Very Low Sulphur Fuel Oil. The Drift Committee was activated once again and Cedre provided advice on clean-up operations. As there was a lot of buzz on the use of human hair as a sorbent, Cedre carried out tests in its lab.

Finally, two persons from Cedre attended the X-Press Pearl incident in 2021, as members of the UNEP/OCHA team deployed at the request of Sri Lankan authorities. One of the challenges of this particular case was the loss of containers

of plastic pellets. The ship also carried chemicals in containers, and finding out which of these had burnt, which were still on the ship, at sea, on the bottom or on the shoreline was also an issue.

Lessons learnt and questions raised by these incidents will be discussed. This reflection will also allow us to highlight some new phenomena or the confirmation of certain trends in terms of reaction to this type of event in France.

Keywords: incidents, spill, oil, chemicals, containers, sea, river, assistance, aerial surveillance, modelling, communication, societal demands, loss of experience.
