

# Oil spill clean-up on Brazilian beaches making volunteers sick

**RECIFE:** Volunteers flocking to the Brazilian shore to clean up the mysterious oil polluting more than 100 northeastern beaches are getting ill from collecting the toxic sludge without the proper equipment, health authorities said on Friday. After oil slicks washed up beaches along more than 2,000 kilometers of tropical coastline, hundreds of people have turned out to clean the beaches, many using their bare hands and feet for lack of gloves, boots or even masks to block the fumes.

"I had nausea and diarrhea the next day, and a splitting headache," said Vera Lucia Silva, a local government clerk who said she and a friend collected 80 kg (176 lbs) oil with their hands into plastic bags on the Itapuama beach south of Recife. Silva, who ended up on a drip in the local infirmary, said local authorities provided no equipment and after two days several charity groups appeared and handed out masks and boots.

The thick sludge has been washing up for nearly two months, and authorities and experts have been baffled by its origin. It is believed to be Venezuelan crude but there is no evidence of how it entered the open ocean. A patchwork coalition of volunteers, public employees and armed forces have taken to the beaches to save turtles and other wildlife, collecting the gummy oil into bags with varying levels of training and support.

The Pernambuco state health department said on Thursday that 19 people had been treated in hospital for intoxication either from direct contact with the oil or from the solvents being used to dilute it in the cleanup efforts. Local media reported that hundreds more had reported symptoms but not sought treatment.

Gerald Graham, a Canadian oil-spill response expert, said the authorities should be keeping people off the beaches if they were not trained and equipped because exposure to the oil was very hazardous and could cause injury or even death. "The government's response has been really pathetic. They were not there. Why did



**CABO DE SANTO AGOSTINHO, Brazil:** A boy walks out of the sea while removing oil spilled on Itapuama beach on Oct 21, 2019. — AFP

they take so long to act," he said in a telephone interview. Brazil's government has said it followed standard protocols since the start of the environmental disaster. Because the heavy crude does not float on the ocean surface like most oil slicks, officials said that traditional methods of keeping it off the shore have been ineffective. On Friday, Tourism Minister Marcelo Alvaro Antonio visited Porto de Galinhas, a tourist hotspot in Pernambuco. He dipped his feet in the sea to show that Brazil's beaches were clean and open for business, with less than 10% affected by the oil. — Reuters

## Pollution levels in India's capital hit the worst this year

**NEW DELHI:** Pollution levels in India's capital New Delhi have hit their worst for the second time in October-earning a "very poor" rating and indicating air quality could deteriorate further after the Hindu festival of Diwali. The air quality index, which measures the concentration of poisonous particulate matter, touched 388 in New Delhi on Friday, according to U.S. embassy data, way above the "safe" limit of 60. The index measures the concentration of tiny poisonous particulate matter-PM2.5, particles that are less than 2.5 microns in diameter and can be carried deep into the lungs, causing deadly diseases including cancer and cardiac problems.

Senior government officials, who did not wish to be identified because they are not authorised to talk to media, said the main reason behind the sharp deterioration in air quality was a lack of wind speed. A thick, toxic haze could envelop New Delhi and

neighbouring cities if the authorities fail to clamp down on fireworks to celebrate Diwali, the Hindu festival of light that falls on Sunday. Air quality usually starts worsening in New Delhi ahead of Diwali.

The Supreme Court last year allowed the use of only "safe and green firecrackers", for a maximum two hours, and only in designated areas such as parks, aiming to lessen the risk to health. But authorities failed to enforce the decree and crackers continued to crackle late into the night. As a result, PM 2.5 levels in some parts of the city soared to 689 the next day, indicating emergency conditions. To avoid a repeat of last year and wear residents away from bursting tens of thousands of firecrackers, New Delhi authorities are offering residents laser light shows to mark Diwali this weekend.

Other than the smog triggered by firecrackers, smoke from the surrounding countryside, where farmers at this time of the year burn the crop residue in their fields to prepare for winter sowing, causes pollution in New Delhi and surrounding cities. Among a host of measures to curb pollution, the city government of New Delhi has decided to restrict use of private cars between Nov 4-15. Some of the other steps include banning diesel-run generators and burning of garbage. — Reuters

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