

## Business

# Egypt commerce reputation survives Suez Canal blockage

## International salvage specialists play significant role

**CAIRO:** The near week-long shutdown of the Suez Canal threw an uncomfortable international spotlight on Egypt, but experts see limited overall fallout for its commercial shipping reputation. The accident, in which a 200,000-tonne container vessel became wedged diagonally across the canal during a sandstorm, blocked a crucial shipping artery used for 10 percent or more of world trade.

But fears that it could take weeks to refloat the behemoth proved unfounded. Six days into the crisis, after major operations involving a flotilla of tug boats and excavators dredging up sand, the Japanese-owned MV Ever Given was freed and taken to an unobtrusive anchorage. Egypt's Suez Canal Authority was quick to claim credit.

"Anywhere else in the world, this operation would have taken three months," boasted canal chief Osama Rabie, adding that "99 percent" of personnel working at the scene had been Egyptian. Visibly relieved, he said he had been told by President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi that "the reputation of Egypt rested on my shoulders". Sisi, who deposed Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013, spent over \$8 billion to widen and add a 35 km second lane on a northern segment of the canal amid much pomp six years ago.

The country has emerged from the short crisis with credit, said Tony Munoz, editor-in-chief at trade publication Maritime Executive. "The Egyptian government handled the blockage and closure of the critical trade lane exceptionally well, considering the intense international pressure," Munoz told AFP.

### 'A big one'

However, Munoz also pointed to the significant role played by the international salvage specialists who worked alongside Egyptian personnel. Munoz cited in particular the crisis management expertise provided by Resolve Marine's Captain Nick Sloane, who was also salvage master for the clear-up of the 2012 Costa Concordia cruise ship disaster off Italy.

Another expert likewise said international help was crucial. "There was bound to be some domestic flag-waving about the success of the refloating... but it does not diminish the Dutch involvement," said Angus Blair of the American University in Cairo, referring to Dutch firm Smit Salvage.

Both Blair and Munoz saw little or no impact from the canal blockage on Egypt's share of shipping cargo traffic over the medium-term. "In essence, this was only a traffic accident - (albeit)



ISMAILIA, Egypt: A man waves the Egyptian flag after Panama-flagged MV 'Ever Given' container ship was fully dislodged from the banks of the Suez Canal on March 29, 2021. —AFP

a big one," said Blair. "Airports have accidents, but within hours to a day the airport will reopen and then there is an investigation to determine the cause," he added. "So, I do not think there is damage to Egypt's reputation".

Munoz noted that "the alternative of sailing around Africa is not reasonable", emphasizing that the whole "purpose of these mega-boxships is to reduce port calls and operational costs". — AFP

## Inside vaccine production at new BioNTech plant

**MARBURG, Germany:** Decontamination chambers, tight-fitting protective suits, a controlled atmosphere: vigilance is the order of the day when making COVID-19 vaccines at the new BioNTech plant in Marburg, Germany. From the outside, the facility is an unassuming building on the outskirts of the town north of Frankfurt in central Germany.

But that quickly changes when you step inside the rooms of the second European site to manufacture the vaccine developed by BioNTech with US giant Pfizer. Production has been running night and day since the European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved the site last week, with the facility poised to eventually churn out one billion doses a year.

"It takes a lot of manual work and about 50,000 steps to make a batch" of messenger RNA (mRNA), the substance that trains the immune system to protect itself against Covid-19, production manager Valeska Schilling told AFP. From that batch, "we can make some seven or eight million doses of vaccine," said Schilling, who is "extremely proud" of the huge scientific effort.

### 'Extremely proud'

Glass pipette in hand and wrapped head to toe in a blue protective suit, a young employee mixes pharmaceutical ingredients in a sterile bag to begin the process of making mRNA. This step, called in-vitro transcription, is "the most technologically complicated", Schilling notes - less a mass production process than an art form.



MARBURG, Germany: Employees in cleanroom suits test the procedures for the manufacturing of mRNA for the COVID-19 vaccine at the new manufacturing site of BioNTech on March 27, 2021. —AFP

During in-vitro transcription, which Schilling compares to "making a photocopy of a book", enzymes are used to generate up to 500 "copy" mRNA molecules from a single DNA molecule. After the reaction to produce the RNA, the resulting liquid must be purified: the enzymes and DNA used for the transcription are removed, and filtration prevents possible contamination.

In the third and final stage of production in Marburg, the mRNA is wrapped in fatty molecules, or lipids, so that it can get inside of human cells. In all, it takes five to six days to make a 35-litre batch of mRNA, which is then transported to other factories for bottling - currently done in Belgium and soon near Frankfurt. Several time-consuming tests are carried out along the way to ensure the quality of the vaccine, which is around 95 percent effective against COVID-19 according to clinical studies. — AFP

## VW 'sorry' after name-change prank backfires

**FRANKFURT:** Car giant Volkswagen said Wednesday it was sorry for a publicity stunt that duped major media outlets and was criticized by AFP news agency as a "breach of trust". The outrage came after Volkswagen just a day earlier said in a press release it would be changing the name of its US subsidiary to "Volvswagen" to highlight its shift towards electric cars.

The announcement raised eyebrows but company spokespeople insisted it was genuine, resulting in widespread media coverage before VW eventually revealed the rebrand was a joke dreamt up by its marketing team. In a statement sent to AFP, Volkswagen of America said its marketing campaign had sought to draw attention to VW's e-offensive "in a fun and interesting way" as "an April Fool's Day effort".

"The many positive responses on social media showed that this campaign resonated with consumers," it said. "At the same time, we realize the announcement rollout upset some people and we are sorry about any confusion this has caused." Reporters reacted angrily to the stunt, with some saying it was tone-deaf coming from a company still recovering from the 2015 "dieselgate" scandal, when the German automaker was forced to admit it had for years used cheating software in cars to skirt emissions tests. — AFP