Military helps clean up spill, protects fishing port from oil

VALDEZ, Alaska (AP) — Military jets flew skimmers, booms and beach landing craft into Alaska on Sunday, and commanders issued a Pacific-wide call for more equipment to fight the nation's worst oil spill.

Kodiak, the nation's richest fishing port, prepared for the onslaught of oil by putting out log booms, but the Coast Guard said the leading edge of the spill, 60 miles away, retreated a bit and began breaking up into tar balls and sinking.

"That's good news," said Bill Lamoreaux, the state's on-scene coordinator.

The tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on a reef near here March 24, spilling 10.1 million gallons of crude into pristine Prince William Sound. The oil has spread into the Gulf of Alaska and fouled some of the many islands in the region.

On Friday, President Bush said he would send the military to help with the cleanup. Exxon Corp., which has been accused of moving too slowly to contain the spill, will continue to provide materials, manpower and money.

Also Sunday, a 40-foot gray whale was found dead in an oil-fouled area. Wildlife experts said they hadn't determined whether it was the first whale to succumb to the spill that already has killed thousands of other animals.

Exxon said Sunday it was beginning to reimburse fishermen for losses from the cancellation of the herring season and had paid $250,000 to cover expenses for fishing boats attacking the spill on their own.

Coast Guard spokesman Rick Meidt said an Air Force general made a tour of the area and sent a call to bases around the Pacific to find out what was available and what the estimated time of arrival in Valdez would be.

The Coast Guard's Pacific commander, Vice Adm. Clyde Robbins, was joining the federal effort. Other experts dispatched by the Pentagon surveyed the cleanup, and with the help of the military, cleanup gear poured into Valdez.

"C5-A after C5-A is bringing in equipment," including skimmers, more booms and beach landing craft to move people to the oily shoreline, Meidt said.

The Navy sent barges outfitted as hotels so that when coastline cleanup gets under way, workers will be housed near where they are working.

The forecast called for continued northeast winds, which will keep the oil moving toward Kodiak, 300 miles from the accident site. Kodiak last year produced a fish catch worth $166 million.

But Meidt said, "When the helicopters go up, they're seeing streamers a couple of miles long and slicks that are breaking up at the edges."

Herring boats and Coast Guard cutters were dispatched to speed the breakup of the spill before it reaches Kodiak. At Seward, on the edge of a national park, a skimmer stood ready to protect inner bays and fish hatcheries.

Three log booms constructed by two Kodiak logging companies were set in bays, spokesman Linda Freed said. Log booms are highly effective as outer barriers, and standard plastic booms were being used closer to shore, she said.

In Cordova, Exxon said it gave the local fishermen's union $250,000 for expenses to keep boats in the cleanup and said it was writing checks for losses from the canceled herring season. About $12 million worth of herring are taken in a typical season, which usually lasts less than a day at spawning time.

The state Fish and Game Department said the gray whale was found off Montague Island more than 75 miles from Bligh Reef, where the tanker ran aground.

An autopsy will be performed, officials said. Such whales eat by straining sea water for minute animals such as plankton and krill. Gray whales are listed as an endangered species but their numbers have rebounded in recent years.

Gas explosion destroys motel; 1 man missing

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — An explosion apparently caused by natural gas ripped a 40-foot section from a motel Sunday, injuring 31 people, and firefighters searched cautiously through the rubble for the one man believed missing.

The blast occurred four minutes after someone phoned Montana-Dakota Utilities at 1:07 a.m. and reported a strong smell of natural gas, said Dick Blee, the acting Billings fire chief. Firefighters controlled the blaze by 4 a.m.

Blee said a truck belonging to an unidentified man was in the parking lot of the three-story Super 8 Motel. All other registered guests, about 60 people, were accounted for, officials said.

Two people were hospitalized and 29 others were treated and released at the city's two major hospitals, authorities said.

Authorities expressed relief after learning that neither hospitalized person was critically injured and that no more than one person was missing.

"It'll be a miracle if we have only one dead in this," Fire Department Capt. Marvin Jochems said.

"The center of the building is gone, and then there's fire damage both ways," Charlie Allen, acting battalion chief, said.

White smoke continued billowing from the rubble as firefighters picked through it with the help of a piece of heavy equipment used for excavation.

The explosion appeared to be in a central laundry area with natural gas lines, Blee said. Individual rooms in the motel have electric heat.

"We couldn't get upstairs or anything, but there were people jumping out of windows when they heard the explosion," said Jan Hardy, motel night clerk.

"I thought somebody was trying to break in the room," said one guest, William Kartsonis of Denver. "You think it's just a prank, and then you look out and see the smoke. It's a scary feeling."

One couple said the floor of their room seemed to give way, but the carpet remained fastened around the edges, so they could walk to the door.

Super 8 officials would have no comment until the motel's owners arrived from Aberdeen, S.D., a spokesman said.

South Africa offers guerrillas safe passage from Namibia

WINDHOEK, Namibia (AP) — South Africa agreed Sunday to allow black nationalist guerrillas safe passage from northern Namibia to Angola in an offer aimed at preserving plans for Namibia's independence from South Africa.

The proposal could bring to an end the fighting between South African-led security forces and guerrillas of the South-West Africa People's Organization. The violence has threatened to derail the U.N.-supervised plan for Namibian independence.

There was no immediate comment on the offer from the South-West Africa People's Organization, or SWAPO, which has been fighting for independence since 1966.

However, the withdrawal plan appeared similar to a proposal made earlier Sunday by guerrilla leader Sam Nujoma, who called on his fighters to stop firing, regroup and allow themselves to be escorted into Angola by U.N. personnel.

South African Foreign Minister Pik Botha announced the plan following two days of talks between his government, Angola, Cuba, and U.S. and Soviet observers. The talks were held at Mount Etjo, a private safari lodge 120 miles north of Windhoek.

The withdrawal plan gives the guerrillas until April 15 to leave Namibia. Under the proposal, the SWAPO fighters would have two options:

- They could assemble at one of 10 points inside Namibia and relinquish their weapons to U.N. forces, who will then fly them to bases in Angola.
- They could travel to one of eight assembly points on the Namibian-Angolan border. They would be allowed to keep their arms and the Angolan government would take responsibilty for returning them to bases.

U.N. and Namibian territorial personnel would be present at all 18 assembly points, according to the offer, which took effect immediately.

South Africa contends SWAPO has sent more than 1,900 guerrillas into northern Namibia from Angola since April 1 in violation of a regional peace accord that requires them to remain at bases at least 100 miles inside Angola.

SWAPO maintained that the guerrillas were inside Namibia prior to April and should be allowed to set up bases in the territory.

But Nujoma said he made the concession because he did not want to give South Africa an excuse to cancel Namibia's independence plans.

Veterinarian prescribes holistic medicine for pets

TAKOMA PARK, Md. (AP) — Take away Fido's bowl of gravy-laden goodies and treat him instead to a dollop of yogurt or some steamed broccoli. And if Tabby is bothered by fleas, try using a collar soaked in eucalyptus oil or sprinkling garlic on her supper.

This prescription for happy, healthy pets is written by Dr. Monique Maniet, an auburn-haired, Belgian-born veterinarian who practices holistic medicine for ailing dogs and cats.

She uses vaccines and antibiotics, if necessary, but prefers natural foods, soothing herbs, Chinese acupuncture, chiropractic massages and plenty of tender, loving care to help her furry patients heal themselves.

Maniet says she gets "astonishing results" from acupuncture, especially among dogs plagued by arthritis or itching skin. The needles, however, are likely to provoke a yowling, fur-flying complaint from pets.

Prenatal test helps doctors find birth defects

WASHINGTON (AP) — Allison Chin, 3, and her 2-month-old brother, Robert, never would have been born except for a prenatal test called chorionic villus sampling.

Their mother, Karen Chin, had decided against having children after ending her first pregnancy with an abortion because an amniocentesis test showed the baby had a severely disabling genetic defect. Family and friends already knew about her pregnancy, and the abortion was a public trauma she didn't want again.

Then, Chin and her husband, Bobby, learned about CVS.

The new technique is performed weeks before amniocentesis, long before the pregnancy is "showing." The ability to keep her reproductive decisions private, said Chin, helped her decide to try again. Allison and Robert are the result.

"CVS made the difference between having a family and not having a family for my husband and me," she said.

Chorionic villus sampling can determine the genetic health of a fetus as early as eight weeks after conception. This is seven to 10 weeks earlier than is possible with amniocentesis, a prenatal testing method in use for about 20 years.

Those extra weeks are critical to millions of older women who are most at risk for having children with birth defects, and, hence, are more likely to stop a pregnancy with abortion.

In both CVS and amniocentesis, the gender and genetic health of a fetus are determined through laboratory analysis of cells taken from the mother. But the cells used for CVS develop much earlier than those for amniocentesis.

CVS uses cells taken from the chorion, a part of the developing placenta. The chorion is covered with small projections called the villi. These contain cells genetically identical with the fetus. By gently suctioning samples of these villi, a doctor is harvesting the blueprint of the unborn child without actually touching the fetus.

Ultrasonography, a way of viewing the fetus in the womb, makes CVS possible. It uses high frequency sound waves to make a computer-enhanced image of the fetus and its location in the uterus. The machine also guides the doctor to the chorion.

Depending on the position of the fetus, doctors obtain CVS tissue either through the vaginal birth canal or by inserting a thin needle through the abdominal wall.

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