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Oil Spill in Black Sea Strait May Be Worst in Years

Sergei Venyavsky in Rostov na Donu, Russia
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Rescuers on Monday recovered the bodies of three sailors after a Russian freighter sank near the Black Sea. Meanwhile officials assessing damage from an oil tanker spill said that could be the worst environmental disaster in the region in years.

The *Nakhichevan* was one of two freighters that broke up as 18-foot (5-meter) waves battered ships throughout the region surrounding the Kerch Strait, a narrow waterway linking the Black Sea and the smaller Sea of Azov.

[\(See a map of the region.\)](#)

The dead sailors wearing life vests washed up near the island of Tuzla on the western side of the strait, said spokesperson Sergei Kozhemyaka of Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry. Rescuers were looking for five others.

As many as ten ships sank or ran aground in the strait and the northern Black Sea region during the fierce storm, including the *Volganeft-139* tanker, which was loaded with nearly 1.3 million gallons (about 5 million liters) of fuel oil. Nearly half that amount had spilled into the strait and had begun washing up on nearby shorelines.

The Russian tanker's 13 crew members were rescued, authorities said.

Nakhichevan and the other downed freighter together were carrying about 7,150 tons of sulfur, which also spilled into the waters. Experts were trying to determine if that could cause long-term damage.

Alexei Zhukovin, of the Emergency Situations Ministry's branch in southern Russia, said sulfur was not dangerous to the region's natural habitat.

Local television channel Vesti 24 on Sunday reported the sinking of a Russian freighter carrying metal near the port of Sevastopol' on Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. Two members of its 16-man crew drowned and one was missing, it reported.

Maxim Stepanenko, a regional prosecutor, told Vesti 24 that captains had been warned Saturday about the stormy conditions. He said the *Volganeft-139*—designed during Soviet times to transport oil on rivers—was not built to withstand a fierce storm.

Associated Press Writer Carley Petesch contributed to this report from New York.

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