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Tanker Spills Oil Off South Korea

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SEOUL — A Hong Kong-registered oil tanker leaked 10,810 tons, or 66,000 barrels, of crude oil off South Korea's stormy west coast on Friday, in what was estimated to be the nation's largest maritime oil spill, officials said.

A five-kilometer-long oil band was snaking slowly toward the coast, which is dotted with scenic beaches, wild life habitats and oyster and other fishing beds.

"So far we have no damage report," said Kim Jong-seok, an official at the Maritime and Fisheries Ministry. "Much will depend on how the sea currents move in coming hours. We have 40 vessels out there fighting the oil spill."

The spill occurred when a crane-carrying vessel crashed into the 147,000-ton tanker Hebei Spirit on Friday morning, about 5 nautical miles off the coast near Taean, 150 kilometers, or 90 miles, southwest of Seoul.

The collision created three gashes in the tanker's hull. Photographs released by the ministry showed crude oil spurting from the holes. There were no human casualties.

The tanker was carrying 1.8 million barrels of crude oil.

In the previous largest offshore oil spill in South Korea, an oil tank spilled 30,740 barrels of crude and fuel off the south coast in 1995, costing 96 billion won, or \$101 million, in clean-up operations and damages to fishermen.

In 1989, the Exxon Valdez supertanker released about 240,000 barrels of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound, wreaking a major environmental disaster.

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