

# Worries spill over from tilted vessel

## OUR CORRESPONDENT

**Mumbai, Aug. 9:** An environmental disaster looms on the Mumbai and Konkan coasts because of the weekend ship accident.

Shipping authorities confirmed today that around 400 tonnes of oil had spilled from MSC Chitra, which had collided with another vessel on Saturday and has tilted on one side, along with 31 containers containing a "dangerous cargo" of corrosive and toxic materials.

Chief minister Ashok Chavan and his deputy Chhagan Bhujbal conducted aerial surveys of the spill. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is also believed to have asked for a report from Union shipping minister G. Vasani.

Director-general of shipping S.D. Agnihotri painted a grim picture. "The vessel had 31 containers on (the) deck with dangerous cargo. This cargo contains corrosive, toxic and flammable constituents," Agnihotri told a news conference this evening.

Some of these containers have already reached Uran,



Cargo ship MSC Chitra in the Arabian Sea off the Mumbai coast on Monday. (AFP)

north west of Mumbai. Fishermen there who opened them found bottles of a pesticide marked hazardous. Also washed ashore were sacks of a white powder that coast guard officials said could be milk powder.

However, there was confusion over the quantity of the oil spilled. Both Agnihotri and Bhujbal put it at "approximately 400 tonnes, with 3 to 4 tonnes of oil being discharged per hour". Chavan pegged it higher, up to 500 tonnes.

The statement of the DG shipping was silent on it, detailing how much fuel the Panama-flagged vessel contained rather than how much had seeped out.

Late in the evening, coast guard officials — who have been battling the slick with choppers, aircraft and ships for the third day — claimed the oil discharge had stopped. Patches of oil sighted near Elephanta and Butches islands, off Mumbai's Gateway of India, had been cleared

after spraying of chemical dispersants.

However, the coast guard asked the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (Barc) to refrain from using sea water to cool two of its reactors after patches of oil were sighted near the facility.

Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) surveyors who visited coastal areas around Mumbai claimed the slick had reached some popular beachfronts. "I have found oil spill at Sasvane, Kihim,

Revas and Mandava (Konkan coast)," BNHS scientist Deepak Apte said over the phone from Raigad.

But naval officials played down reports of the slick in the area.

The Mumbai Port Trust today appointed SMIT Salvage, a Rotterdam-based company, to control the spill.

The 6,000-odd small fishermen appeared to be the worst affected after the spill forced a temporary ban on fishing. The Maharashtra Fishermen's Association has written to the chief minister demanding a compensation of Rs 10,000 per family for the small fishermen likely to be out of business for the next several months. "These fishermen will virtually starve," association chief Damodar Tandel said.

Mumbai police have lodged a case against the captains of the two ships involved in the collision. State shipping minister Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil said: "A Supreme Court verdict says owners of the ships will have to pay for the costs for pollution, and we will recover the costs from them."