

**New Zealand**

A sunken timebomb? Samoa fears long-lasting damage from wrecked New Zealand navy ship

Samoa says 200,000 litres of diesel has leaked into the sea after HMNZS Manawanui hit a reef, with officials now racing to remove tons more fuel ahead of cyclone season

Michelle Duff in Wellington and Lanuola Tupufia in Apia

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From the sky you can see it. A long white blot in the perfect blue. The HMNZS Manawanui lies about 35 metres beneath the surface of Samoa's southern coastal waters, now just the ghost of a navy ship.

But what can't be seen is the damage left in its wake – to the reef nearby and to the clear waters off the Pacific country, whose way of life is dependent on the ocean.

Residents in Samoa fear long-lasting damage to the marine environment after a Royal **New Zealand** navy vessel sank, with calls for compensation and an independent inquiry amid the destruction of coral reef and an oil spill in an island nation.

New Zealand's prime minister, Christopher Luxon, has [apologised to Samoan leadership](#) for the grounding of Manawanui, which has leaked an estimated 200,000 litres of diesel into the sea after hitting an offshore reef near the southern coast of Upolu on 5 October, an incident described by the ship's commander as the moment her "very worst imagining became a reality". It is the first time the New Zealand navy has lost a ship since the second world war.

The defence force has called a court of inquiry into the sinking, with Luxon and Samoan prime minister Fiamē Mata'afa set to meet ahead of the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in Samoa this week.

But the fortnight since the sinking of the \$100m specialist dive and hydrographic vessel has seen conflicting accounts of the damage, described by [the New Zealand defence force](#) and defence minister Judith Collins as variously a "light slick" and a "trickle". In an interview with current affairs show Q&A and [in a press conference](#), Collins [cast doubts on the 200,000 litre figure](#) given by Samoan authorities, saying it was likely much less. "There are reports of some small leaks but these are very small amounts, and they are from the pipes that take the fuel around the ship, not the storage tanks," she said.



📷 HMNZS Manawanui sink off Samoa on 5 October, the first time the New Zealand navy has lost a ship since the second world war. Photograph: Profile Boats

Samoa's chair of the Marine Pollution Advisory Committee (MPAC), Fui Mau Simanu, told the Guardian the destruction in the surrounding area was "significant". An initial assessment showed substantial damage of 5,000 sq metres to the reef where the shipwreck and anchor chain lie, he said. Three 17ft shipping containers were still causing damage, and the ship contained about 950 tonnes of diesel, with tanks needing to be removed. A team of 60 New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) personnel were working on the salvage and clean-up operation alongside Samoan authorities.

The NZDF did not respond to the Guardian's request for comment.

Last week, New Zealand's deputy chief of navy, Commodore Andrew Brown, [told Radio New Zealand](#) that mitigating the environmental impact was a priority.

"We're taking this very, very seriously and we're working hand-in-glove with the Samoan government and with our other agencies such as Maritime New Zealand," he said.

Experts say it is crucial to remove the fuel before cyclone season in November, which could lead to the ship moving or breaking up.

"It [the diesel] can get on to the reef, it can coat seabirds and marine mammals, turtles and sea snakes," said University of Waikato associate professor in biodiversity and ecology Nick Ling.



📷 RNZN Naval Divers on the scene above HMNZS Manawanui. Photograph: New Zealand Defence Force

“For them, getting a lung full of diesel is going to be fatal. Fish can absorb it, if it’s a sub-lethal dose they can survive and it could taint their flesh.” Coral regeneration could take decades, he said.

Victoria University of Wellington political scientist Dr Iati Iati is among those calling for an independent inquiry.

“If New Zealand is to preserve any hope of being an honest broker in this region, it must avoid steps that will make this look like a cover-up,” he told the Guardian. “New Zealand has significantly compromised another country’s security.”

‘You can smell the diesel’

Samoa villagers say their livelihoods are already being affected. It is a blow for a country still recovering from the tsunami that decimated the marine ecosystem 15 years ago.

“We are seeing before our eyes the full extent of the oil leak polluting our coast, our clam reserve is not safe, it’s affecting our village and this is likely going to be a long-term problem for us,” nearby Tafitoala village representative Taloaileono Vasasou said.



Senior matai (chief) of Vaiee village Tuia Paepae Letoa said fishers who went out to sea from Tuesday to Friday came back covered in a substance they suspected was oil. He said the fish were slippery and smelled like oil. “Anything from the sea is no longer safe for us, those fish have been taken in for investigation,” said Letoa.

Villagers from the Safata district were convening a meeting to talk about the impact of the wreckage and push for compensation. They accused their own government of downplaying the damage. “This will continuously affect this generation and the future generation ... we have to take action,” Letoa said.

Afoa Patolo Afoa is a 75-year-old senior matai and fisher from Tafitoala, who supports a family of 20. Afoa estimates he makes about 1,000 tala (\$365) on Sundays from selling fish. With a 20km stretch of coastal area closed on 7 October, there is uncertainty about when it will open and how safe seafood would be.

“We can’t fish any more, we don’t have any other source of income,” Afoa said. “For now we are turning to our plantation for some support, but it’s not the same.”

Others are angry at the fact the shipwreck happened at all.

“You can smell the diesel, they’ve destroyed our reef - I grew up on that reef all my life and they shouldn’t have hit it there, no way,” says Manu Percival, a surf guide who helped with the rescue effort of the 75 crew and passengers from the Manawanui.



Locals have been salvaging food from the ship's lost containers. Photograph: Manu Percival

He has filled his freezer with bags of chicken and food from the containers strewn across the reef, but said he hadn’t seen any New Zealanders helping to pick up rubbish.

“Because we’re a developing, poor country, they don’t care. It’s disgusting, especially as NZ has done so much historical damage to Samoa. It’s spread out across a huge area.”

The Defence Force said it had emptied one of the three containers from the ship, and one had already been empty. No pollution or dead marine wildlife had been found on the shoreline, and the containers were in the process of being removed.

A spokesperson for New Zealand’s ministry of foreign affairs said New Zealand acknowledged concerns and appreciated the importance of the marine and coastal environments to the people of Samoa.

“It is too early to comment on other issues at this stage. We first need to understand the situation and that will take time.”

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