

Angola: Drilling ever deeper, hoping for the best

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LUANDA: While BP struggles to contain an oil spill that US government estimates indicate is now the largest ever in the Gulf of Mexico, questions are being asked about how well-prepared Africa's oil-producing countries are for a similar incident.

Taking the high end of US government estimates, as much as 532 million litres of crude oil have gushed into the Gulf since the April 20 blowout of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig operated on behalf of oil giant BP.

Angola, which vies with Nigeria for the title of the continent's largest oil producer, pumps close to two million barrels of oil per day, with significant current and future operations offshore in deep and ultra-deep waters.

According to Vladimir Russo, former national director at Angola's Ministry of Environment, the country is prepared to respond to a spill.

"We have the National Oil Spill Contingency Plan which was created in 2008 which makes it compulsory for all the companies operating here to have their own mechanisms and means to address oil spills," he explained.

Under national legislation, the operators themselves are responsible for dealing with incidents, as has been the case with BP and its blow-out in the Gulf of Mexico. All companies are required by law to help with relief efforts.

Angola is a member of the Global Initiative for West and Central Africa, a partnership between the International Maritime Organisation and the International Petroleum Industry Environment Conservation Association.

The idea behind the initiative is to enhance the capacity of countries to prepare for and respond to marine oil spills through workshops and inter-country exchange.

"We have had small oil spills in the past and it has worked - the companies were ready, the government was also ready and it got international help," said Russo. "It might take some time to get here, but within 24 or 48 hours equipment will be available for the cleaning up that is needed."

Russo said that work was ongoing to create sensitivity maps of the coastline to help improve response to any oil leaks that might occur.

He said that where fishing communities were affected by spills in the past, they had received compensation in the form of nets and boats by the oil companies involved.

But Elias Issac, Angola director of human rights and governance watchdog the Open Society Institute, believes there is lack of environment-specific legislation and enforcement procedures that leaves not just small communities but the whole country vulnerable to a major incident in Angolan waters.

"I don't believe that Angola is prepared. What happened in the Gulf of Mexico is a big example of the huge dangers of the extractive industry, especially the oil industry," he told IPS.

"What would be good is if the Angolan government made a specific law on the environment, a law which regulated the oil companies in environmental terms and the effects and impacts of this industry on local and traditional communities.

"What we have at the moment is legislation from the Petroleum Ministry, but this is not enough."

Issac also does not believe previous arrangements to compensate communities affected by the oil industry have been sufficient, and in May joined campaigners from around the world at a shareholders' meeting in Houston to lobby US oil giant Chevron over its environmental record in Cabinda, an oil-rich northern enclave of Angola separated from the country by a sliver of Democratic Republic of Congo.

According to Issac, beaches in Cabinda have been left blackened by oil washed up on shore, killing fish and other marine life. He says several lakes have also been polluted.

Chevron declined to respond to IPS about Open Society's claims about its environmental and social record.

Like several other international operators with projects in Angola, the company, which operates locally as CABGOC (Cabinda Gulf Oil Company), also declined to speak about its safety plans in light of the Deepwater Horizon incident.

The extent of oil-related damage to Angola's waters and coastlines is unclear. Campaigners like Issac say the impact on the country's environment is far greater than most people realise.

Russo admitted there was no public database listing spills and impacts.

"This tends to be analysed on an ad hoc basis," he said, "But for the spills that I know of, there have been cleaning campaigns and things have been restored."

He added that as oil companies were now required by law to carry out environmental audits of their operations, he was confident that more detailed information on spills would be collected and stored in the future.

The United States was, until now, regarded as a country with stronger enforcement of legislation than most, but it appears there were too many holes in their safety nets.

The US Congressional Committee on Energy and Commerce attributes the Deepwater Horizon incident to a catalogue of bad decisions stemming from financial and time pressure, combined with the accidental aspect of the "blow-out preventer" not activating.

The chances of similar event occurring in deep water elsewhere cannot be ruled out and the gaps in Angola's legal framework and regulation appear to be much larger.

"As everyone knows, it is a high risk industry," said Russo, "but it provides high profits, large numbers of jobs and of course it's the driving force of the Angolan economy, so one needs to put all this in the balance and decide what to do."

BP is currently producing oil from Block 18 in deep water off Angola's coast and is also running the world's first Deep-ocean Environmental Long-term Observatory System. DELOS is monitoring changes in the water and ocean floor and fish populations in the block for a period of 25 years using state-of-the art cameras and research tools.

The company is about to start the development phase of the ultra-deep water Block 31, in depths of between 1,500 and 2,500 metres.

Asked whether it was reviewing safety arrangements for Block 31, a BP spokesman in Luanda said he was unable to comment directly but told IPS: "Safety remains our highest priority and we are committed to ensure safe and reliable operations wherever we operate."

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