

# Third vessel to sink in area in last 3 years

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Last September, Unesco had written to the Bangladesh government to suspend the water route immediately and report compliance by February. It threatened to withdraw its world heritage site tag and list the Sunderbans as an endangered world heritage site instead, said a source.

The route has been suspended after the accident. A UNDP team will inspect the area soon. Monirul Khan, who is part of the team, said, "We will submit a preliminary report on the oil spill and submit the final report after a second visit."

This is the third vessel to sink in the area in the last three years — the other two carried fly ash and fertilizer. The oil tanker was going from Khulna to Gopalganj when it was forced to drop anchor on Monday

## Times View

India must immediately offer all help to Bangladesh in containing and cleaning up the oil spill. The Sundarbans delta, which straddles both countries, has a fragile ecosystem that's already threatened in multiple ways. A catastrophe of this nature, if allowed to fester, could have disastrous and irreversible consequences for the region. Bangladesh has admitted it doesn't have the resources and expertise to handle a crisis of this magnitude. That makes it all the more urgent for India to help, and fast. Once the immediate crisis is tackled, both countries must enact and implement laws that bar toxic materials from being transported through the waterways of this world heritage site.

night due to poor visibility. Around 5am the next morning, it was hit by another vessel from behind. The front of the tanker sank, spilling almost the entire oil into the river.

Eight crew members swam ashore but the navigator is missing, said Iftikhar Mahmood, a senior journalist with Pratham Alo, a Bangladeshi daily. The other vessel is yet to be traced, said a source in Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh Navy has salvaged the wreck.

In 2012, Bangladesh had declared the area a dolphin sanctuary, home to about eight species. Salt water crocodiles also inhabit the area. "The dolphin sanctuary will probably be the worst-hit. We have to carry out an inspection on the extent of the damage. Small birds that feed on insects and fish, too, will be affected," said Ali.

Mangroves are likely to be affected as well. "Trees along the coastal belt may die soon if the spill is not restricted immediately," feared a wildlife activist.

The Sunderbans delta comprises a network of rivers and canals straddling Bangladesh and India. Khan, however, believes the oil spill in the eastern Sunderbans may not impact mangroves on the Indian side. The authorities have begun a small-scale clean-up, but admit that they lack the hardware and experience for a major operation. "We've not started any big clean-up effort yet. The forest department doesn't have the technology to deal with this kind of disaster," said senior forest official Amir Hossain.

Bangladesh's state-run petroleum corporation was using buoys to restrict the slick, while local fishermen have been asked to use nets to try to stop the oil entering small canals.