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Mauritius

# Wakashio Four Months On: Mauritius Drenched In Oil, Health And Debt Issues

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**Four months since the *Wakashio* oil spill**, the communities around the South East of Mauritius have been suffering with oil-related health issues, debt and the constant seeping of oil from the coastline that has permeated deep into the sand and silt. [1]

Local NGOs who were responsible for the hand stitched community booms to protect Mauritius from the oil spill have accused the under-fire Mauritian Government of creating a 'mirage' for the visit of Japanese Foreign Minister, Toshimitsu Motegi. The Japanese Foreign Minister is being welcomed to the country this weekend with a sailing regatta and musical festival around the *Wakashio* shipwreck, part of which still lies on Mauritius' reefs. [2]

NGOs are angry at how the community-led efforts that first responded to the oil spill were hijacked by large Japanese corporate interests which appear to be supporting an unpopular Government to cover up the true extent of the oil and salvage damage, and have excluded the local community from taking any ownership in carefully restoring the coral lagoon upon which their livelihoods depend. [3] In [videos and photographs](#) taken this week and released today, they reveal the extent of the oil still present along Mauritius' coast four months on from the August 6 oil spill.

The [NGOs' message](#) is clear to the visiting Minister of Foreign Affairs: "We will never forget, we will never forgive, and we demand full restoration and reparations for the physical and psychological damage caused to our island."

In a [press conference](#) earlier today during the visit of Minister Motegi, these groups called for a full apology from the Japanese Government and demanded that Japan conducts a comprehensive investigation into the circumstances of the oil spill, how the response was handled by Japanese organizations, and commit that there will be full community oversight with the clean up response going forward.

## Oil, health and debt issues

Video footage taken yesterday reveals the extent to which the oil remains in Mauritius' waters and coastline. The [3 minute video](#) was taken by local community group Center for Alternative Research and Studies (CARES) and their production company, [Rising Ocean](#). CARES is a Mauritius-based research organization that publishes environmental, social and economic issues around the Indian Ocean. The President of CARES is Ashok Subron, a well known advocate for ecological and social equity issues in Mauritius. [4] He is also the spokesperson for one of the local community groups who led the community oil protection boom efforts, Rezistans ek Alternativ.

Local NGOs are not just angry against the Mauritian Government - who they accuse of withholding information about the oil spill - but also the fact that Japan's large ship insurance companies can afford to finance hundreds of international consultants to fly into the country, and yet even the most basic support cannot be given to the local population.

These community groups have been demanding a basic health assessment center, food assistance and a moratorium on debt repayments for those who are suffering the loss of all economic activity in the region.

They are also angry at what they call the 'fact-free' clean up operation by 'pseudo-Japanese NGOs' masquerading as international organizations.

Rezistans ek Alternativ is one of the most prominent social organizations in Mauritius who was at the forefront of the community-led boom efforts. [5] Their spokesperson, Ashok Subron, describes what they are still seeing in the South East of Mauritius four months on.

### 1. Who are Rezistans ek Alternativ?

**Ashok Subron:** We are an eco-social movement in Mauritius. We are well known for standing up for environmental issues, particularly in protecting Mauritius' beaches and unique ecology. We are also known for speaking up against sectarianism and promoting a more united and peaceful pan-Mauritian identity among our multicultural population.

We also work closely with labor organizations on social issues. In particular with ocean-related worker organizations, such as fishing and tourism boat captains, workers in the tuna fisheries industry and seafarers. Our work covers trade unions who represent around 25,000 of the Mauritian workforce.

In Mauritius, we have 300 active members and enjoy the support of 3000 affiliate members. In the 2015 local election, our candidates won 7.1% of the vote. We were involved in a high profile UN Human Rights case to allow political candidates to avoid being forced to be classed by their ethnic identity. Yet the Government has still not put this recommendation in place, in breach of the UN Human Rights pronouncement in 2012.

We are visible in the Mauritian media, and are active in many international and global ecological forums, such as the alternative conferences to the COP Climate Conferences in Paris 2015, Bonn 2017 and Poland 2018.

### 2. Four months on, what impact has the Wakashio had on the local community?

**Ashok Subron:** There has been a devastating economic impact, a health impact and an ongoing ecological impact. We have tried to capture some of this in videos taken this week.

The economic impact on the South East of Mauritius has been catastrophic for people living here. The Wakashio had a cascading effect in multiple sectors of the economy. It was a socio-economic shock for thousands of people in this belt

There are three unique factors in how the economy of the South East is structured.

First, although COVID-19 had impacted international tourism, Mauritius had been focused on using domestic tourists to keep hotels and restaurants functioning. Prior to the oil spill, the middle class of Mauritius would spend their weekends and spare time around Blue Bay and the surrounding coastline of Mahebourg, Ile aux Aigrettes, and on the lagoon. There was economic activity taking place - hotels and water sports were busy. Just look at all the kitesurfers who were around the Wakashio when it grounded.

Second, tourism was the center of a whole range of economic activities. The most visible examples were the front line hotel staff and tourism boat captains. But then there are all the supplier industries. This meant the impact of the oil spill extended far beyond those living and working right on the coastline, but further inland too.

The professions impacted included artisanal fishermen, fish-processing family businesses, restaurants, artisanal (tourist) shops, taxi services, tourist car hire firms, hotel staff, beach hawkers, pleasure craft captains, marine guides, watersport guides, artists who perform in hotels along the coast, small planters and breeders, small street food

vendors.

With planters and breeders, oil was absorbed into the coastal plantations of the towns of Ti Frere and Grand Sable (where the dead dolphins were found 10 miles away along the coast). This has now raised questions whether the oil could have entered the food chain.

Third, there is a large informal economy around the South East for structural and historic reasons. This had a twin effect. It meant many low income occupations, such as beach hawkers, did not have formal employment registration. This resulted in them being overlooked from the current Government assistance programs and they do not have any alternative form of income as they are banned from the lagoon. The other effect is that even if someone was not able to earn an income in the past, they could still go fishing in the lagoon and find a fish to eat or sell locally. This meant that while not wealthy, no-one was ever hungry in Mahebourg. The lagoon always provided. A lot more women were involved in this informal economy.

The Wakashio wreck disrupted all of this. The South East has been brutally hit. We are now seeing begging and genuine hunger - phenomena we have never seen before in this region

## Debt and Hunger

This has been exacerbated by the way the oil spill response has been handled.

First, large financial institutions and banks continue to demand payment for housing and other consumer debt. Where residents can't pay, banks are seizing assets such as cars. Homeowners are selling TVs. Restaurants have seen a 80% drop in income. They cannot break even at these numbers. They cannot earn a side income as they cannot fish, nor can they go into the lagoon to fish and eat. It is rapidly developing into a crisis that the local community are getting angry at.

Second, we are seeing the growth of hunger.

Street markets selling fresh fish were very popular in Mahebourg, where people from around the country would come down every day to purchase fresh fish, creating employment for a range of informal support industries

We are seeing a spiraling impact. Due to the effect of the debt and unemployment, local volunteers organized the distribution of food packs soon after the oil spill. Initially, they thought they would only focus on the skippers and those directly impacted by the closure of the lagoon. However, when they started distributing these food packs, they started discovering just how widely the Wakashio oil spill had impacted the region. It was the entire belt of the South East that was suffering.

They had to enlarge their food pack delivery to meet the needs of this larger group. This is a region that was historically ignored by the Government with public infrastructure, and this is why social organizations like Rezistans ek Alternativ have such a presence here. There is anger that under COVID-19, large hotel companies and banks have been bailed out with billions of Rupees from our National Reserves, and yet the poorer population of Mauritius most directly impacted by the oil spill are not being registered or supported, forcing NGOs to step in.

It is not just the Government of Mauritius but the international organizations who have not been listening or

responding appropriately.

### 3. What are the health impacts from the oil spill that you are seeing?

We conducted a survey of almost 2500 people and have been shocked at the results, even four months on.

From the earliest days of the oil spill, we had been calling for the Government and the Japanese aid organizations to set up a tent to collect health information from the local community. The capital city is a long way away by bus - a journey that there and back takes an entire day. We needed a place in Mahebourg to collect this information that the local community could get to easily and share their needs and questions.

When the Government, the World Health Organization or Japanese aid organizations did not do this, we had to step in. We set up a tent on Mahebourg waterfront to share information and better understand the needs of the community following the oil spill.

Initially, we only expected to see a few dozen fishermen and tourism boat captains. However, that is when we realized the scale of what was happening.

We surveyed 2457 people.

Of this 2313 (94%) reported adverse health outcomes linked to the Wakashio.

There both physical health issues as well as mental health (trauma and post-traumatic stress syndrome or PTSD) issues.

Our survey was representative of the community, with 49% of respondents being women, and many of those who were pregnant or mothers of young children explaining what they were experiencing too after the oil spill.

The most notable physical health issues were:

**Respiratory problems.** The smell of the oil lingered for weeks in the regions saturated by the oil. Those who worked directly on the spill or who lived in the close vicinity have been experiencing breathing difficulties since the spill.

**Skin problems.** We are seeing two big issues with skin problems in the region that doctors do not know what to do about. Many of those who made skin contact with the oil have now found their skin has become much darker. The local hospital is unable to treat this, and have not even set up a dedicated triage for those who arrive with oil-spill related symptoms. This is particularly acute for the fishermen and boat captains who entered the oil and went into the lagoon to save it from the oil. In addition to the darkening of the skin, we are also seeing a rise of skin infections. Again, the community has not been given any medical information from those experienced in oil spill about what we are dealing with, and how serious this is.

**Insomnia.** Many in the region have been unable to sleep for four months. This is triggering further medical complications. We cannot tell whether the insomnia is due to the physical effects of the oil or the mental stress, but it is a real issue, and the Government and Japanese organizations are failing to take these health issues seriously.

We do not know what the effect of the oil spill will be on the many pregnant women or children whose schools are along the coast and who were exposed to the smell and touch of the oil that still remains saturated along our coast. It is an abuse of our human rights.

### **60% population impacted by Wakashio-linked mental health issues**

We have also seen a massive increase in those experiencing mental health issues linked to the oil spill.

Most notably, post-traumatic issues and depression. This has now triggered a range of other mental-health related complication such as rising alcoholism, and a family crisis of couple tension and rising separations.

We had a system at our community tent at the waterfront, where we would refer locals inhabitants to other organizations who are better placed to help.

We found that of the 10 people who would approach us, 6 would report mental, psychological and trauma issues.

Even I was shocked by how high these numbers were, even among many close friends who hadn't shared this before. During the incident of the oil spill, I had moved and was living in Mahebourg for six weeks. We could clearly see in their faces the oil spill impacting the people living there. We could feel their distress.

No-one from the Government ever relocated or spent time here, which is why there were so many protests when they arrived.

### **Where is the One-Stop-Shop support center?**

The local authorities remain detached from local needs. Most Government officials remained in the capital city, which is half a day away by bus. They never took the time to understand the local needs.

We have never seen any visible presence by the World Health Organization or Japanese Organizations who not once offered support to us and the local community to understand their health needs.

What was - and still is - needed is a one-stop-shop that is set up on the Mahebourg Waterfront. It should be easy to access for all the local community. There needs to be a professional understanding and recording of all the symptoms the population is experiencing and this effort needs to be properly supervised by independent organizations.

This one-stop-shop should cover health, social and economic assistance.

The current approach to go to the capital city with formal documentation is not working, and is a broken system.

## Trauma of the dolphin deaths

I also want to point out the particular trauma of seeing the deaths of the dolphins. That hit the entire country.

The people of the region have a strong emotional connection with Mauritius' dolphins. For 25 years, I've worn a chain of a dolphin around my neck to symbolize the connection we feel with these wonderful creatures and the ocean.

These dolphins are like family to us. The fishermen see them in the morning when they go out to fish early in the morning on the edge of the lagoon. Tourists and the local community enjoy playing with them. This was what life was like in our lagoon. They were like family.

The dolphins were a symbol of the intelligence, peace and our symbiotic relation with the ocean.

Seeing so many of them wash up dead on our shores was traumatic. I think about this every day and the images we saw. We could never have imagined this.

It was like a mass killing of a family. Especially seeing the way they were then treated and transported on the back of trucks.

We felt a genuine hurt and trauma.

Then, to make matters worse, there has been no explanation of how they died. Until now, we have not received any reports almost four months later. We know their deaths are connected with the Wakashio. Not having an explanation for how they died is like not having closure to the death of a loved one.

Yet, there has been no public report, evasive responses in parliament. We also expect the Japanese and international authorities to take their responsibilities seriously.

Separate from the oil spill, this event in itself was a major shock for the entire island. We will never forget them, and will continue to demand answers for how they died.

### **6. What environmental impacts from the oil spill that you are still seeing?**

There is still a lot of oil everywhere. There are areas where the oil is dark and saturated in the mangroves and coast. There are other areas where we pump the oil out and a few days later, the oil reappears. We believe the oil is in the groundwater.

There is also a thin film of oil that appears across the lagoon. This is just the visible parts. We do not know what the chemical consequences are of the oil spill or oil in the biological chain. This data is not being collected - either by the Government of the Japanese organizations leading the oil spill response.

We see the oil close to Riviere Creole, the internationally protected Ramsar mangrove forest site of Pointe Jerome, the Mahebourg public theater of Pointe Canon where the cleanup has not even started as the cleanup teams cannot even send pumps here, despite several weeks of trying.

When we enter the water, we feel the oil on our feet. We can even smell the oil in various regions. The lagoon has changed.

For the last four months, these regions have been out of bounds to the public. Citizens have been prevented from reporting all of this. The clean up operation has also been conducted in a highly secretive way without any community oversight or accountability. This is totally unacceptable.

So it is incompatible that the lagoon is being opened by the Government to tourism activities for Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, when we are still seeing oil in the lagoon. Where are the responsibilities of the international organizations in certifying whether this is safe?

### 7. What actions do you wish to see being taken?

**Ashok Subron:** We don't want the people of Mauritius to be forgotten by the world.

There are four actions we wish to see being taken: on climate, corporate accountability, peace, and locally here in Mauritius.

## Redefining our relationship with nature and the climate

We want the oil spill to become a lesson - not just for Mauritius and the Indian Ocean, but for the whole of humanity. The spill needs to become a catalyst for humanity to redefine our relationship with our natural treasures and the ocean.

The ocean covers 71% of our planet. It is key to all life on our planet. Without the ocean, there would be no life. Climate change is forcing all of us to reevaluate our relationship with our natural treasures.

Every time we try to take action on climate, we keep hitting big vested interests linked to the 'extractivist economy.'

The oil spill and climate change are two sides of the same evil coin. The great ocean scientist, Sylvia Earle, said that ocean acidification is the slow but accelerating impact that will overshadow all the oil spills that have ever occurred, put together.

Mauritians are an island people, an ocean nation. We are the ones who will bear the consequences of both sides of this evil coin - the oil spill and the climate crisis.

We are at the front lines of the climate catastrophe and the disaster hurtling fast toward us. We want international institutions, authorities and other nations to have respect for our children.

It is the children of this generation who in fifty years time will already bear the consequences of the climate crisis. We don't know under what temperatures the planet will be at - whether we will meet the 1.5C target or be three times warmer than this, with all the consequences that will accompany this scenario.



## Reign in 'extractivist' multinationals

International authorities have struggled to put maritime economic activities within the framework of climate agreements. We need regulations and we need to ensure maritime activities are part of this.

We don't want money or aid, but we want these bodies to address the climate agreements agreed as part of the UN process. We want you to fight your corporations, State and other vested interests that are threatening our life and those of our children. We must also enshrine the right of nature within our constitutions for nature to become the key determinant of economic and social activities. Economic and social activities should be subordinate to nature's rights, not the other way round.

We also need to have binding treaties on corporations. We want this to become a reality. For the last thirty years, we have seen a total deregulation of corporate activities around the world. This is taking us to the brink of disaster, as we see what these corporations have done to the planet.

Wakashio was just one oil spill. And it was clear from this, that the people had no say. The company that wrecked their ship on our reef, they are the ones who are now monitoring, testing and cleaning. They have become judge, jury and executor of the actions that should be taken. We have lived here all our lives. Yet we are given no say in their activities in our lagoon. This relation needs to change. It is undemocratic.

We are the ones who are the victims of climate change and the oil spill. Where is our say in all this?

## A peaceful ocean

We also do not want our country to become a pawn in a broader game of international vested interests, whether economic, military or imperial.

We want to work toward a healthy ocean, but also a peaceful one. We do not want military bases on any island in the Indian Ocean. The proliferation of military bases and installations in our region is alarming, whether on Diego Garcia or Agalega, which have been transformed into bases for external powers.

Maybe it is time to bring back the vision of the Non Aligned Movement from the 1970s. It was a vision that the UN adopted as a resolution to define the Indian Ocean as an Ocean Peace Zone. For the 21st century, this can be reimagined as an ecological peace zone, putting nature first. That is our vision for the future and we invite other nations to collaborate. Together, let's turn this vision into a reality.

## A more responsive State apparatus in Mauritius

Specifically on the Government of Mauritius and the Wakashio oil spill, we have these demands: we don't want the Government to surrender on reparations.

The Government needs to properly organize, conduct the proper science, and go to international courts of law to sue those who were responsible for the devastation caused to our island.

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Whatever the Government chooses to do, we are preparing our own case. Should the Government not assume its responsibility, the people will assume theirs

We want to restore the environment to how it was. Before the oil spill and before the climate crisis. We are asking that those responsible for both the oil spill and the climate crisis be automatically liable for reparations. Reparations is a strong word as we will never fully be able to repair the damage caused - it is permanent.

However, we need there to be enough of a deterrent that such an incident never occurs again, anywhere in the world.

We will never forget. We will never forgive. And we demand rehabilitation and reparations now.

12 December 2020

Source [Forbes](#).

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[1] The MV Wakashio oil spill occurred offshore of Pointe d'Esny, south of Mauritius, after the Japanese bulk carrier Wakashio ran aground on a coral reef on 25 July 2020 at around 16:00 UTC. The ship began to leak fuel oil in the following weeks, and broke apart in mid August. Although much of the oil on board Wakashio was pumped out before she broke in half, an estimated 1,000 tonnes of oil spilled into the ocean in what was called by some scientists the worst environmental disaster ever in Mauritius. Two weeks after the incident, the Mauritian government declared the incident a national emergency. [Wikipedia](#).

[2] *Forbes* 11 December 2020 "[Japan Foreign Minister's Three Tests In Mauritius Oil Spill Visit](#)".

[3] *Forbes*, 11 December 2020 "[The Rise And Fall Of Japan Over The Deadly Mauritius Oil Spill](#)".

[4] *Mu.Express*, 25 October 2019 "[Ashok Subron: «Notre crime a été de vouloir poser candidats en tant que Mauriciens»](#)".

[5] See Facebook, page [Rezistans ek Alternativ](#).