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Black Sea Oil Spill Reaches Abkhazia's Shores

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Abkhazia. **MT**

Heavy fuel oil from December's spill in the Black Sea has reached the shores of Abkhazia, more than 350 kilometers (217 miles) southeast of the spill site, a local climatologist told Kremlin-funded media on Sunday.

"There's a slight excess [in oil concentrations], but it's absolutely not dangerous for vacationers and locals who have already opened the swimming season," Asida Akhsalba told Sputnik Abkhazia, though she noted the pollution could affect marine life.

Akhsalba said Abkhazia, a Russian-backed breakaway region of Georgia, lacks the funding and equipment to monitor air and soil pollution or to assess the full extent of the oil deeper in the sea.

Authorities in Abkhazia currently conduct monthly water testing, Akhsalba said, adding that surface water temperatures off the coast are rising, potentially increasing pollution risks.

In one of the worst Black Sea environmental disasters in decades, two aging Russian tankers on Dec. 15 spilled roughly half of their 9,200 metric tons of mazut, a heavy fuel oil, after being caught in a storm near annexed Crimea and southern Russia's Krasnodar region.

President Vladimir Putin previously warned that warming sea temperatures in the spring and summer could cause more oil to rise from the seabed.

Abkhazia, wedged between the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains, is recognized internationally as part of Georgia but has been under de facto Russian control since the 2008 war. The region remains a popular tourist destination for Russian travelers.

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