



GOVERNMENT OF GIBRALTAR

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PRESS RELEASE

No: 175/2011

Date: 8th June 2011

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“The Gibraltar Government launches investigations, and denies ill-informed and politically motivated comment in Spain that the consequences of the recent fire in the Port were caused or exacerbated by alleged delays in accepting material Spanish help.”

The handling of the incident

It has been suggested in the usual quarters in Spain that had the Gibraltar Government accepted the offered Spanish help sooner, the fire could have been put out sooner, and its consequences, namely the spillage of sillage into the sea and consequent contamination of beaches could have been averted. It is said that this could have avoided the explosion of the second tank. This is all complete nonsense.

In the first place no “second tank” ignited or exploded following the explosion and fire in the tank that burned for many hours. This was because the operations to cool the adjoining tanks by spraying them with water was entirely successful, initially using only Gibraltar’s own resources and subsequently supplementing them with Spanish resources, namely water projecting tugs.

There seems to be an ignorant belief underpinning some Spanish comment that the water projecting tugs, which was the only resource offered by the Spanish authorities during the afternoon were able to put out the fire and would therefore have done so sooner if invited in sooner. This is sheer ignorance. As every housewife knows, you do not put out a fuel fire with water. Accordingly, since the tank cooling action plan was entirely successful in its only objective, namely preventing all the adjoining tanks from igniting, nothing which subsequently occurred could or would have been prevented by allowing the Spanish water projecting tugs in sooner.

The extinguishing of a fuel fire requires a plan based on the sustained attack of the fire with sufficient quantities of fire fighting foam. This was neither offered by nor available to the Spanish authorities or any of the Spanish tugs. The whole issue of the time that it allegedly took the Gibraltar Government to accept Spanish help is therefore a total red herring: irrelevant to the time it took to put out the fire and to the pollution of the sea.

Gibraltar's own supply of foam, and stock initially provided by the Cepsa Refinery (which together proved to be insufficient) were used up in an unsuccessful early attempt to extinguish the fire. Fresh supplies of foam were quickly marshalled by the Gibraltar Government from commercial suppliers in Seville and from the Cepsa refinery (to whom the Gibraltar Government wishes to publicly express its gratitude).

In the event, the fire extinguished itself by a process known as "boil over" just before the second foam attack was due to be launched, a possibility that the City Fire Brigade and the Civil Contingency Committee were aware of throughout the incident.

The Gibraltar Government is therefore entirely satisfied with, and rejects all the criticisms of the handling of this regrettable and serious incident by all of Gibraltar's emergency and port services and the Government. All relevant help from Spain was accepted at the appropriate and necessary time.

It seems that there are some in Spain who just cannot control their politically motivated instinct to rubbish and denigrate Gibraltar at every opportunity. Nor do they appear to have any difficulty with resorting to lies and a display of ignorance to do so. Of course, when similar or more serious incidents happen (more frequently) in the Campo area they go quiet.

The Gibraltar Government once again expresses its thanks and appreciation to the Spanish authorities for their solidarity and help throughout the incident.

The Aftermath

The Gibraltar Government has already taken steps to ensure that Gibraltar's stocks of fire fighting foam are greatly increased to ensure that we have enough to provide for our own needs in the future and also to be able to assist in providing others with support in the event of an incident in the nearby area.

Gibraltar's enforcement agencies, namely the Royal Gibraltar Police, the Factories Inspectorate, the Environmental Agency and the Port Authority have already begun a coordinated multi-agency investigation in accordance with their respective statutory duties. Coordination is provided by the Government's Chief Technical Officer, Michael Gil.

This will be supported and supplemented by an external investigation into the incident to be carried out by Capita Symonds who are specialised and highly experienced in the investigation of incidents of this sort in the UK and elsewhere.

All of these investigations are aided and informed by comprehensive CCTV footage of the lead up to and the moment of the incident as it occurred which were captured by the 'Independence of the Seas' and other Port CCTV cameras, and all of which is now in the possession of the Gibraltar Authorities.

Once the Government have these reports to hand, it will consider what further steps are appropriate in the light of what they find.

The Citizens of Algeciras

The Gibraltar Government expresses its regret and apologies to the citizens of Algeciras, and any others affected in the Campo, for the fact that their beaches and environment have suffered a brief but significant contamination as a result of this accident in the Port of Gibraltar.