

Ukraine Claims Russia is Coercing "Volunteers" Into Spill Cleanup Effort



Cleanup operations near *Volgoneft-239* (Courtesy Russian Marine Rescue Service)

Published Jan 15, 2025 10:32 PM by [The Maritime Executive](#)

The Ukrainian government claims that Russian authorities are drafting students in occupied areas to join the cleanup effort in the Kerch Strait, where bunker fuel continues to wash ashore from a double tanker casualty in December.

Last month, the aging river-sea tanker *Volgoneft-212* sank in a severe storm about five nautical miles outside of the Kerch Strait. Sister ship *Volgoneft-239* went aground on a rocky shore off Taman shortly after, and it gradually began leaking.

Like other vessels in Russia's "river-sea" fleet, the two small tankers were more than 50 years old, and were not designed for winter storm conditions in the Baltic. Both were carrying about 4,000 tonnes of mazut, a Russian heavy fuel oil grade that solidifies at room temperature, and an estimated 3,700 tonnes of this cargo spilled into the marine environment.

Ukraine's Center for National Resistance reports that Ukrainian students were initially recruited from occupied areas and sent to Krasnodar and Crimea to assist with the cleanup operation. The students were not provided with protective equipment for cleanup duty, the center said, and a new group is now being recruited for "volunteer" work in Kherson.

The official response took time to mobilize, and local residents have complained of government inaction. Last week, Russia declared a state of emergency to address the spill and set up a unified command to oversee the interagency response. The need for continuous cleanup is ongoing as the spill spreads: the Russian-appointed governor of Crimea, Sergey Aksenov, reported last week that the

local effects of pollution on the peninsula could approach the severity of the damage already experienced in Krasnodar, on the other side of the strait.



Responders have built an embankment around the stern of Volgoneft-239 to contain the tanker's cargo and gain access (Marine Rescue Service)

The wreck of *Volgoneft-239* remains above water and accessible to salvors near Taman (above). To reach it, responders have completed a new road to the shoreline, and they are hoping to pump off all remaining cargo by the end of January. In the interim, about two kilometers of boom have been deployed around the wreck site to contain the ongoing spill, and responders have removed about 1,200 tonnes of oily water from the stern section.



Responders use a grab dredge to pull oily sludge out of the water near Taman (Marine Rescue Service)

Local authorities estimate that nearly 6,000 seabirds have been exposed to oil so far, and a large-scale volunteer effort to rescue and clean them is still under way. The lingering effects on local dolphin species and commercial fisheries are expected to last for months, as components of the oil remain suspended in the water column, and the overall effects may take a decade or longer to dissipate.

Ukraine's ministry of ecology has calculated the damage from the spill as about \$14 billion, based on the impact to the marine environment and to Russian-held territories on the shoreline.



Diver's helmet after a salvage dive at the wreck of Volgoneft-212 (Russian Marine Rescue Service)