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Trinidad Oil Spills Leave State-Owned Energy Company Scrambling To Clean Up (PHOTOS)

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Nick Visser



Reporter, The Huffington Post

At least 11 oil spills have crippled parts of Trinidad and Tobago, coating miles of beach with crude as the state-owned energy company scrambles to control what's being called one of the country's [worst environmental disasters](#).

[Petrotrin](#), Trinidad's state-owned oil company, first responded to an oil spill near [La Brea](#) on Dec. 17, according to [a report](#) from the Trinidad Guardian. Over the past month, the company has confirmed at least [11 spills](#) and was slapped with a \$3.1 million fine from the country's Environmental Management Authority last week, which the company's president, Khalid Hassanali, called "[harsh](#)."

(Story continues below)



Dexter Philip / Trinidad Express



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Here's where it gets weird.

The pipeline responsible for the first of the leaks at Petrotrin's Point-a-Pierre facility, which resulted in an initial spill of more than 7,000 barrels, [may not have undergone any inspections](#) for the past 17 years, according to a confidential report commissioned by the company and obtained by the Trinidad Guardian. Of the other 10 leaks, Petrotrin has [accused saboteurs](#) of causing at least 2 while releasing [a series of media releases](#) praising what they describe as "significant progress" during clean-up efforts, saying the beaches would be clean [one to two weeks](#) after the spill.

Petrotrin did not return requests for comment in time for publication.

However, local officials have accused the company of [trying to downplay the extent and size of the spill](#), according to the Trinidad Express. Two former energy ministers also came forward earlier this month, saying Petrotrin *did* know about the state of [its aging infrastructure](#) after a government audit was ordered in 2010.

"There was no question of sabotage, it was all a question of bad operations on the part of Petrotrin," MP Paula Gopee-Scoon said. "It was a cover-up from day one."

[Petrotrin has since used](#) the controversial dispersant [Corexit 9500](#) to control the spill, used in record quantities by BP during 2010's Gulf oil spill. Many scientists have said the chemical becomes [far more toxic than oil alone](#) when the two are mixed, harming marine life, but Petrotrin's president has [defended the use of the dispersant](#), saying "all the chemicals we are using are approved chemicals and we are using them in the approved manner."

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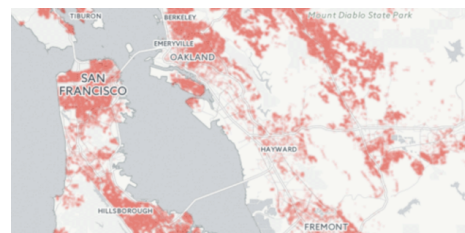
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Petrotrin's chairman denied the occurrence of [any more spills](#) in the region this week and insisted claims that oil had spread to neighboring Venezuela were false. But government officials have demanded the Minister of Energy commission [an independent investigation](#) into the cause of the spill "by people who don't have anything to protect and no rear end to cover."

Trinidad's energy department approved a new [national oil spill contingency plan](#) in January 2013.

UPDATE: Jan. 22 — Contrary to media reports of there being 11 spills, Trinidad's Environmental Management Authority [released a statement](#) on Jan. 17 claiming there have been only four that have impacted 12 locations and 10.5 miles of beach.

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