

# Aegean volunteers battle to turn plastic waste tide

Zakynthos | Greece

Dressed in her protective wetsuit and scuba gear, Antigone Kouteri jumps into the murky waters of Zakynthos harbour in search of plastics -- and promptly snags her arm on a submerged object.

"It was a tyre," offers her patrol mate Efthymis, coming up with a discarded beer bottle. "My treat!" he jibes.

The Ionian island of Zakynthos is one of Greece's most pristine travel destinations, renowned for its azure waters and fabulous beaches, an environment clean enough to be a major Mediterranean nesting ground sought out by loggerhead sea turtles.

But even here, plastic pollution poses a grave threat to wildlife.

Kouteri is one of nearly a dozen volunteers from Aegean Rebreath, a Greek organisation formed in 2017 to protect Aegean biodiversity from waste.

Within three hours, the team has collected four tyres, two shopping carts, a street lamp, metal boxes, plastic bags, dozens of plastic bottles and several kilometres of fishing line.

"Marine litter is a global issue, so it is (present) in Greece. More than 70 percent of marine litter is plastic in Greece," says Katerina Tsagari, a biologist at the Hellenic Centre for Marine Research near Athens.

Tsagari says her team has found litter, most of it plastic, in about 75 percent of loggerhead sea turtles tested.

Overall, they have found plastic ingestion in between 20 and 45 percent of the species tested, which include fish and mussels.

With a coastline of some 14,000 kilometres (8,500 miles), one of the longest in the south-eastern Mediterranean, Greece



Aegean Rebreath, a Greek organisation formed in 2017 to protect Aegean biodiversity from waste

attracts tens of millions of tourists every year.

It's a regional problem. The Mediterranean, a partly closed sea, accumulates 570,000 tonnes of plastic annually from surrounding countries, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

WWF has reported that Greece produces 700,000 tonnes of plastic per year, or 68 kilos per capita. Out of that, 11,500 tonnes end up in the sea, it said.

## 'Junkyard' beneath the waves

"There is a junkyard beneath the blue waters," says Violetta Walczyk, a Greek-Polish lawyer active with Aegean Rebreath.

On the Cycladic island of Andros, mounds of waste from a 2011 hilltop landfill collapse are still to be found in the sea below.

In its two years of operation, Aegean Rebreath has amassed 9,000 plastic water bottles, 3,6 tonnes of fishing net and 289

tyres.

The government readily admits that nearly 40 tonnes of plastic waste end up in Greek seas every day.

It recently started a campaign to phase out single-use plastics such as cups and straws -- no small feat in a country with a huge coffee-to-go market.

Speaking last month, Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said that marine protection was a "key priority" for a country so dependent on tourism.

Greece continues to pay millions of euros in fines to the European Commission concerning the operation of illegal landfills.

But recycling efforts are still basic. Greece last year eliminated free supermarket bags, long after other European countries.

"Recycling in Greece is a joke," snorts George Sarelakos, the co-founder of Aegean Rebreath. "Every municipality has its

own policy, there is no central strategy," he told AFP.

George Triantafyllou, the HCMR's head of research, says the institute is coordinating a European project, Claim, across 13 EU countries in addition to Tunisia and Lebanon to eliminate microplastics.

The project includes developing photocatalytic technology to accelerate the degradation of microplastics in seas and rivers, he notes.

The HCMR has also helped develop a floating litter-collection barrier that is currently deployed at the mouth of Kifissos river in Athens.

"I believe everybody should change habits. We don't have to use plastics in our everyday life," says George Triantaphyllidis.



WWF has reported that Greece produces 700,000 tonnes of plastic per year, of which 11,500 tonnes end up in the sea



A newly-wed couple looks at the rubbish collected from the sea by volunteers from Aegean Rebreath

# China slaps sanctions on US over Hong Kong unrest

AFP | Beijing

China suspended US warship visits and sanctioned American NGOs yesterday in retaliation for the passage of a bill backing pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong.

The financial hub has been rocked by nearly six months of increasingly violent unrest demanding greater autonomy, which Beijing has frequently blamed on foreign influence.

Last week US President Donald Trump signed the Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, which requires the president to annually review the city's favourable trade status and threatens to revoke it if the semi-autonomous territory's freedoms are quashed.

The move came as the world's two biggest economies have been striving to finalise a "phase one" deal in their protracted trade war.

"In response to the unreasonable behaviour of the US side, the Chinese government has decided to suspend reviewing the applications for US warships to go to Hong Kong for (rest and) recuperation as of today," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a regular press briefing.

China had already denied requests for two US Navy ships to dock in Hong Kong in August,



Hong Kong has been rocked by nearly six months of increasingly violent unrest demanding greater autonomy, which Beijing has frequently blamed on foreign influence



Protesters in Hong Kong are pushing for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability, but the city's pro-Beijing leadership has refused any major political concessions

without specifying a reason why.

"Operationally, from a military point of view, it doesn't really make a difference for the US, as they can use many naval bases in the region," Michael Raska, a security researcher at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, said.

However, it "sends a signal that US-China tensions will continue to deepen," Raska said. The last US navy ship to visit Hong Kong was the USS Blue Ridge in April.

J. Michael Cole, a Taipei-based senior fellow with the Global Taiwan Institute, said the move was "mostly symbolic" but yet another sign of the "tit-for-tat escalation which is poisoning the bilateral relationship."

An editorial from government mouthpiece *Global Times* said Beijing could take further measures if the US "continues to escalate the provocation in Hong Kong." "The measures announced on Monday are only the lightest," it said.

## Behaving 'badly'

Hua said they would also apply sanctions to a number of US-based NGOs, although failed to give any specifics over the form the measures would take.

Sanctions will apply to NGOs that had acted "badly" over the recent unrest in Hong Kong, she said, including the Nation-

al Endowment for Democracy, Human Rights Watch and Freedom House. There was "already a large amount of facts and evidence that make it clear that these non-governmental organisations support anti-China" forces and "incite separatist activities for Hong Kong independence", Hua said.

She accused them of having "great responsibility for the chaotic situation in Hong Kong".

Human Rights Watch said it had received "no communications from the Chinese government" about what the sanctions mean.

"Rather than target an organisation that seeks to defend the rights of the people of Hong Kong, the Chinese government should respect those rights," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch, in a statement.

Protesters in Hong Kong are pushing for greater democratic freedoms and police accountability, but the city's pro-Beijing leadership has refused any major political concessions.

The increasingly violent rallies have hammered the retail and tourism sectors, with mainland Chinese visitors abandoning the city in droves.

The city's finance chief warned Monday that Hong Kong is set to record its first budget deficit in 15 years.

## German rescue ship asks Italy to take in migrants



The rescue ship Alan Kurdi is named after the Syrian child whose drowning in the Mediterranean in 2015 brought global attention

Berlin

A German charity yesterday said its rescue ship was heading to Italian shores with 69 migrants on board, hoping they will be allowed to disembark.

The ship, the Alan Kurdi, is named after the Syrian child whose drowning in the Mediterranean in 2015 brought global attention to the migrant crisis.

The Sea-Eye charity said the ship had been unable to contact the Maltese coast guard for help and was therefore now directed towards Italy.

"We are horrified at the irresponsible behaviour of European sea rescue services," Sea-Eye spokesman Julian Pahlke said, saying they had fallen short of their "duty to co-ordinate search and rescue".