

Suez Canal Blocked After Container Ship Runs Aground

On Tuesday 23 March 2021, Egypt's Suez Canal was blocked after a large container ship ran aground at the southern end of the canal, halting marine traffic in one of the busiest and most important waterways in the world. As of Thursday, the vessel remains wedged across the waterway, and other vessels continue to be blocked as attempts to dislodge the ship are ongoing. In a statement released on Wednesday 24 March, the Suez Canal Authority disclosed that the vessel, the Ever Given - a 59-meter-wide (193.5 feet) ship, ran aground after 40-knot winds and a sandstorm resulted in low visibility and poor navigation. The 224,000-tonne vessel, which was sailing under the Panamá flag, was en route to the port of Rotterdam in the Netherlands when the incident occurred. The container ship had entered the crucial East-West trade route on Tuesday morning and ran into difficulty when it was approximately 6 nautical miles from the southern end of the estuary. The Ever Given was transiting north from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean when it ran into trouble at about 7:40 AM



after the vessel suffered a blackout. The vessels' operating company, Evergreen, confirmed in a statement that the ship is wedged across the trade passage at the canal's 151-km (94-mile) mark. The incident resulted in vessels in a northbound convoy being held at anchorages, while the southbound convoy was also blocked. Officials have indicated that the Ever Given's crew are "safe and accounted for," and that no injuries were reported.

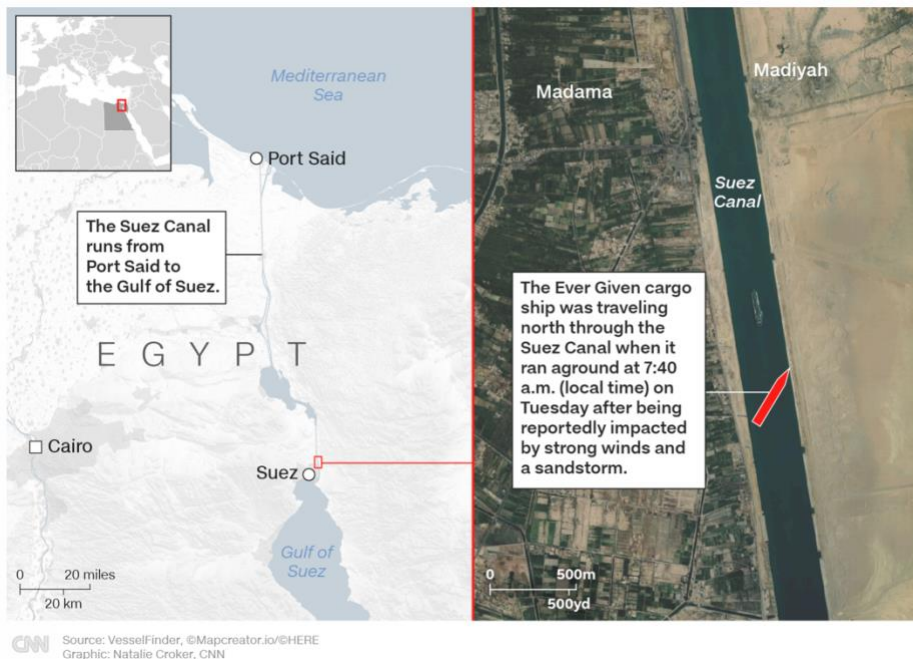
Source: BBC

Suez Canal

The Suez Canal passage accounts for approximately 30% of container ship traffic globally per day. The alternative shipping route between Asia and Europe, which would entail navigating around the African cape, takes a week longer. In 2020, according to figures released by the Suez Canal Authority, nearly 19,000 vessels, or an average of 51.5 ships per day, passed through the canal. While Egypt has reopened the canal's older channel in a bid to divert some traffic until the grounded vessel can move again, the blockage has resulted in a rise in oil prices on international markets and concerns about how long it will take to remove the vessel. Global shipping firms are also becoming increasingly concerned whether they will have to re-route vessels around the African cape if the Ever Given is not removed soon.

Large-scale Blockage

The container ship continues to be blocked at the southern end of the Suez Canal and with the vessel remaining wedged across the waterway, other vessels have been blocked from moving in either direction. The Suez Canal Authority has indicated that re-floating the container vessel is "technically very complicated" and could take days. Officials have also indicated that due to the damage, the Ever Given is unlikely to be able to sail now and will most likely need to be towed to the nearest parking site, the Great Bitter Lake District located some 30 km north. The vessel will then likely be towed with its cargo to the nearest port - either Sokhna port, located 20 km south of the city of Suez, or Port Said, 100 km to the north. The cargo will then be offloaded and the vessel will undergo repairs, though if the damage is serious, the vessel will be towed to a marine shipyard.



Source: CNN

Implications and Risks

The impact on traffic through the Suez Canal will depend on how long it takes to clear the container ship. As of Thursday 25 March, dozens of cargo vessels carrying vital goods remain stranded at both ends of the canal as efforts are continuing to dislodge the vessel. At high tide on Thursday, efforts to re-float the Ever Given resumed, with five tugs working to drag the vessel to deeper water. A further three tug boats are reportedly heading towards the vessel, though the ship's GPS signal indicates only minor changes to its position over the past 24 hours. Diggers on the ground have also been moving sand from where the vessel is wedged into the side of the canal bank. Overnight, marine services firm GAC issued a note to its clients, stating that while efforts to free the vessel continued, wind conditions and the sheer size of the vessel "were hindering the operation." Experts have already warned that if the blockage is not likely to be cleared in the next 24 - 48 hours, some shipping firms may be forced to reroute vessels around the southern tip of Africa, a move that would add a week to the journey. This could result in more expensive shipping container contracts if vessels are forced to take longer and more time-consuming routes. There is also concern about the number of vessels stuck in the northern and southern ends of the canal - notably those that are static which may be at a higher risk of being targeted. The build-up of congestion near the Suez Canal also has the potential to increase risks to vessels in the Red Sea, and in the wider Gulf of Aden. All vessels currently in these areas or planning to transit in the following days are advised to adopt heightened alertness, particularly if forced to remain static within the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden if congestion at the Suez Canal were to continue. The wider Red Sea and Gulf of Aden regions have been impacted by geopolitical tensions, which have added to the already heightened threat to maritime shipping in this area. In the past 24 months, a number of vessels have been targeted by remote-controlled waterborne improvised explosive devices (RC-WBIEDs) and anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). A range of sea mines have also been placed throughout coastal areas, and have targeted vessels transiting this region. While the risk of piracy in waters around Somalia remains low, vessels transiting these waters continue to report suspicious approaches highlighting the continued threat of piracy in this region. Smuggling and migration are also common within this area. Vessels transiting this region should remain aware of migrant vessels, which are often unlit and very poorly maintained and which could increase the false alarm rate.

Officials are also concerned about congestion at the canal, with one official indicating that "at present, the number of ships waiting could reach 100, which will increase over time," adding that "the disruption of navigation is expected to cause ship congestion, which takes two to three days to normally restore traffic order."

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