

SOLOMON ISLANDS SEA POLLUTION

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# AUSTRALIA HELPS TO CLEAN UP OIL SPILL

Fears grow over damage to world heritage-listed waters

SYDNEY

**A**USTRALIA is ramping up efforts to tackle an oil spill from a cargo ship stranded in World Heritage-listed waters in the Solomon Islands as fears grow of spiralling environmental damage, Canberra said yesterday.

MV *Solomon Trader* ran aground on Feb 5 while loading bauxite at remote Rennell Island, some 240km south of the Pacific nation's capital Honiara.

Around 75 tonnes of heavy fuel oil have leaked into the sea amid failed salvage attempts, while more than 600 tonnes of the oil remains on the stricken 225m vessel.

"Given escalating ecological damage, and a lack of action by commercial entities involved, the Solomon Islands government has requested Australia's assistance," Foreign Minister Marise Payne said.



The oil spill from the 'MV Solomon Trader' along the coastline of Rennell Island. AFP PIC

"In response, we are mobilising an offshore pollution mitigation operation, including equipment, vessels and specialised personnel."

The operation will be run by Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) and will work alongside the Solomons' own ef-

orts. AMSA has been using aerial surveillance to monitor the unfolding environmental disaster, while New Zealand on Friday dispatched two oil spill containment specialists to the area.

Rennell Island is the largest raised coral atoll in the world and includes a Unesco World Her-

itage site which extends kilometres out to sea.

The islanders rely on waters in the ecologically delicate region for their livelihoods.

The *Solomon Trader* is registered in Hong Kong and operated by a Hong Kong-based company, but its ownership is unclear.