Active pockmarks, mounds and slope instabilities on the Nile margin:

In situ observations, geophysical, sedimentological and geochemical evidence

G. Bayon (1), L. Loncke (2), S. Dupré (3), S. Gontharet (4), S. Migeon (5) and the Nile Pockmark Group

(1) Département Géosciences Marines, Ifremer, France, (2) Université de Picardie, France, (3) Sedimentology and Marine Geology Department, Vrije Universiteit, The Netherlands, (4) Université Pierre et Marie Curie, LOCEAN, France, (5) UMR Géosciences Azur, Observatoire Océanologique de Villefranche, France (Germain.Bayon@ifremer.fr)

Recent MEDIFLUX actions on the Nile deep-sea Fan (Nautinil 2003 and Mimes 2004 expeditions) have investigated fluid seeping structures and their relationship with slope instabilities. Pockmarks and mounds, characterized by high reflectivities on multi-beam data, are particularly abundant in the central province of the Nile cone, between 1700 and 2500 m water depth. In this area, sediments are completely destabilised by mass-wasting processes (i.e. creeping; Loncke et al., 2002, 2004).

The submersible Nautil was used to gather video and still-camera imagery, map the surrounding microbathymetry and sample carbonate crusts, sediments, fluids and associated organisms. A methane sensor (METS, Capsum) was used to provide some qualitative indication of enhanced methane concentrations in bottom-waters along each dive transect. Additional 3.5 kHz profiles, EdgeTech deep-tow sidescan sonar data and Kullenberg sediment cores were also collected in this active area. The mineralogical, geochemical and isotopic composition ($\delta^{18}$O, $\delta^{13}$C, $^{87}$Sr/$^{86}$Sr, $^{143}$Nd/$^{144}$Nd) of carbonate crusts has been analysed to gain further insights into their mode of formation. In particular, high-resolution profiles of major elements and isotopes have been performed along crusts cut perpendicular to their growth banding.

Two types of structures have been identified during the Nautil dives: 1) small circular
pockmarks of variable diameter (3-20 m) and 2) massive carbonate pavements corresponding to large mounds (~400 m long and ~3 m high). Acoustic sidescan sonar record of the water column has revealed that gas plumes are present above some of these structures. Methane anomalies have been also detected in bottom-waters using the Capsum sensor, along each dive transect. They occur over large depressions showing signs of intense bio-activity, in the immediate vicinity of carbonate mounds. Interestingly, on 3-5 kHz profiles, these depressions correspond to areas where sediments have been thinned up by creeping processes. In addition, two major observations were made from the analysis of sediment cores: 1) numerous figures of fluid ascents are visible within the sedimentary cover, and 2) the upper part of the underlying debris-flow deposit is highly compacted.

All these observations question the role of slope instabilities upon the formation of carbonate build-ups and the overall fluid seepage activity in the central province of the Nile deep-sea fan. Our observations suggest that the surface of debris-flow deposits act as a decollement layer, most probably, where fluids can migrate preferentially. The pathways for gas-rich fluids ascending to the seafloor are clearly controlled by the internal structure of the destabilized sedimentary cover (i.e. thinned areas). Finally, geochemical analyses of carbonate crusts indicate a shallow source for methane-rich fluids and provide additional constraints on their formation processes.