

Cyanide spill "a catastrophe of European dimensions"

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A poisonous chemical spill has destroyed wildlife and fish stocks and threatened the water supplies of 2.5 million people in central Eastern Europe. Romania's River Somes, Hungary's River Tisza and Yugoslavia's Danube, Europe's largest waterway, have all been catastrophically polluted. The Black Sea is also expected to be affected by the spillage, which originated at the Baia Mare gold mine in northern Romania.

On February 1, approximately 100,000 cubic metres (3.5 million cubic feet) of cyanide, used to extract gold from waste, was released into the river when a reservoir wall at the mine collapsed. The lethal chemical first entered the Somes river before passing into the Tisza river, a tributary of the Danube, where it reached a density of 800 times the accepted maximum level. Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria all draw drinking water from the Danube. The European Union Commissioner for Transport and Energy, Loyola de Palacio, said that the spill was "a catastrophe of European dimensions".

Hungary has described the spillage as Europe's worst ecological disaster since that at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Ukraine in 1986. The Tisza has been officially declared a dead river. Hungarian towns along the Tisza have banned the use of water, fishing and sales of fish—threatening the livelihoods of many fishermen—and emergency water supplies had to be brought in for those living close by. The Hungarian daily *Magyar Hirlap* reported crowds of stunned people gathering, with black flags, to "mourn" the river.

Serbia's Environment Minister Blazic said, "The Tisza has been killed. Not even bacteria have survived." Although the chemical has gradually lost its lethal effect as it becomes diluted with river water, over the weekend hundreds of dead and dying fish were reported to be piling up at the junction of the Danube

and Tisza, just 50 kilometres upstream from the Yugoslav capital of Belgrade.

The allowable maximum of cyanide per litre of water is 0.1 milligrams. Yugoslavia's official Tanjug news agency said the cyanide level was 1.1 milligrams per litre at the Hungarian town of Szeged bordering Yugoslavia on Friday night, but this had fallen to 0.06 milligrams on Sunday. Approximately 300 tonnes of dead fish have been removed from the rivers, and authorities are trying to find the best means of disposing of them.

The River Tisza is expected to take at least five years to recover. Speaking on Belgrade's independent B2-92 radio station, Istvan Baskonyi, the mayor of Kanjiza, a northern Yugoslav town, said that whilst reports had estimated that the cyanide would disappear from the river system in one month, heavy metals will remain in the seabed. Karoly Pinter of the Hungarian agriculture ministry said it was this more than the cyanide that posed the gravest danger. "The heavy-metal parts which are extremely poisonous have been deposited in the mud. These disintegrate much slower and poison the environment for much longer," he said. Zoltan Illes, the Hungarian parliament's environmental spokesman, warned: "The fact that heavy metals also got into the rivers means an even worse problem. It will poison the whole food chain."

The poisoning has sparked a bitter dispute over compensation claims. Hungary, Romania and Serbia are all demanding damages from the gold mine's owners, a Romanian joint stock company, Aurul S.A. The majority share is held by the Australian company, Esmeralda Exploration Ltd, whilst the Romanian government control 45 percent and Romanian business interests the remaining 5 percent. Aurul shares were suspended on the Australian Stock Exchange after their

value slumped by almost 40 percent as news of the incident became known.

Romania, which has gained a reputation as a major industrial polluter in the past, has tried to down-play the damage in order to improve its chances of gaining EU membership.

Romania's Carpathian mountains contain significant amounts of gold and other precious metals. Esmeralda Exploration began work on the Baia Mare Tailings treatment facility in 1997, after an Australian engineering firm, Lycopodium, won the contract for the US\$28.2 million project.

The Aurul mine works stockpiles of tailings previously treated for base metals, which are turned into slurry and sent to a conventional gold treatment plant. According to reports, the gold mine had experienced problems with water prior to the latest incident. Esmeralda's latest annual report documents an earlier small leak from pumping equipment and incidents in which the main treatment plant received slurry flow rates at double the intended capacity. It also reports hostility towards the project from environmental and political groups.

Aurul SA has secured three exploration licences covering 78.52km(x2) in the Oas-Gutai Mountains, immediately north of the mining town of Baia Maire. Another venture in which Esmeralda holds a 97.5 percent interests, Explorer SA, has also secured three exploration licences for 74.82 km(x2) land adjacent to the Aurul licences. The company web site boasts that "the licences held by the two companies have secured all known prospective ground from the western mining fields around Baia Mare and as far north as the Ukraine border".

Esmeralda has admitted that the lake containing the mine's poison waste over-flowed in heavy rains, but accused east European officials of exaggerating its effect. Esmeralda spokesman Chris Codrington said that footage of dying fish shown on CNN and Hungarian television shows them "still flapping. If it was cyanide poisoning they would be dead. And, if there are dead fish in Hungary why have there not been any reports of dead fish in Romania, which is much closer to the tailings dam?" The company is sending its own scientists to investigate the incident and has said it will vigorously oppose any compensation claims.

Esmeralda chairman Brett Montgomery said

allegations that cyanide had killed the fish caused him "considerable scepticism", adding that the extreme weather that had caused the initial spill could also be responsible for the deaths. Australian government officials also defended the company. Western Australia's state resources minister Colin Barnett said, "From my knowledge ... the mine was developed to a high standard." Environment Minister Robert Hill said it would be wrong to "rush to judgement," whilst rejecting calls for tougher laws to be introduced on Australian mining companies operating overseas.

Eastern European officials have accused Australia and other western countries of "ecological colonialism". A Hungarian government spokesman said that there was "no question" of Aurul's responsibility for the disaster. "We can count the dead fish and it's sure that the fish did not die of pneumonia," he said. Zoltan Illes, environmental spokesman for the Hungarian parliament, said that the Australian government had a responsibility, even "for privately-owned Australian companies". Calling on Hungarian ecologists to begin an international campaign over "eco-colonisation", he told a local radio station, "The profit was produced here but the profit is used elsewhere. The contamination is being left here, nature is being destroyed here in Central Europe, the health of hundreds of thousands is being endangered, while in the meantime these technologies are, perhaps, not permitted in their own country, in Australia or, say, in western Europe."

The cyanide spill has exacerbated the environmental crisis within Yugoslavia, already facing serious pollution problems arising from NATO's air bombardment. Between March and June last year NATO targeted petrochemical plants, oil refineries, fuel storage depots and major industrial plants—releasing thousands of tonnes of highly toxic chemicals into the air and water supplies.



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