

Toxic sludge catastrophe in Hungary

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8 October 2010

Hungary declared a state of emergency in three western counties on Tuesday following a flood of toxic alumina sludge from an industrial site that killed four villagers and injured many more.

The disaster occurred late on Monday when a reservoir burst at the huge Ajkai Timfoldgyar Zrt aluminium plant, located around 165 kilometres west of Budapest. The reservoir released a tidal wave of thick red sludge, which immediately mixed with floodwaters that have built up in the region for days. The sludge-infected tide then flowed through several villages—leaving some places buried under a one-and-a-half-metre layer of toxic waste.

It is estimated that at least 1 million cubic metres of the sludge, a mixture of lead and other heavy metals, contaminated an area covering 40 square kilometres. The poisonous red sludge currently covers streets, fields and meadows. The wave of sludge washed away cars and swept away bridges and houses while leaving many other houses badly damaged.

Residents of the affected villages reported that they jumped out of windows to run to higher ground when they heard the roar of the floods. According to the Interior Ministry, the sludge killed at least four people, including a three-year-old child. Six people are still reported missing and 120 injured were treated in hospitals, in some cases for burns that stripped human skin to the bone. Hundreds of people either lost their homes or were forced to abandon them. Hungarian authorities report that a total of 7,000 people have been affected.

The head of the Hungarian Environment Ministry, Zoltan Illes, admitted that the incident was the worst-ever chemical accident in Hungary. Fears of a much greater catastrophe are growing as the toxic tide threatens to run into the 1,775-mile long Danube River, which flows through Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Moldova before ending in the Black Sea.

The deputy head of a Hungarian water management company declared any pollution of the Danube would constitute a “disaster for the water supply” for a huge swathe of eastern Europe. The sludge has already

produced severe environmental consequences for the three Hungarian regions affected, but a contamination of the Danube would threaten the river’s huge fish stock and also pollute the water supply for residential and commercial sites along the river.

This latest incident in Hungary is not unique for the region. In January 2000, in the northwest Romanian town of Baia Mare, not far from the Hungarian border, sludge containing cyanide escaped when a gold mine reservoir burst. The resulting toxic spill went on to kill a massive amount of fish in the Hungarian and Serbian parts of the Tisza River.

On Wednesday, angry Hungarian villagers gathered outside the mayor’s office in the village of Kolontar and demanded compensation from the Hungarian Aluminium Production and Trade Company that owns the Ajkai Timfoldgyar plant.

Furious residents said that the disaster had not merely razed many houses to the ground; it had destroyed the whole community and had made worthless those houses that remained standing. Villagers besieged the company’s operations manager who tried to address the crowd from the passenger seat of a police vehicle. Residents demanded that the whole settlement be bulldozed with compensation paid those who had lost their houses and livelihoods.

While politicians and the company management seek to deflect blame for the latest incident, a brief examination of the recent history of the Hungarian aluminium industry makes clear it was only a matter of time before such a disaster took place.

The Ajka alumina factory, which was originally founded in 1943, was taken over by MAL (Hungarian Aluminium Production and Trade Company), a company set up in 1995 following the widespread privatisation of the industry in the 1990s. A key figure in the privatisation process was the former prime minister and leader of the social democratic MSZP party, Ferenc Gyurcsany. Gyurcsany, one of Hungary’s richest citizens, is known to have gained part of his own huge personal fortune from

the privatisation of the aluminium industry.

The cause of the catastrophe was the drive for profit. Experts agreed that the bauxite used for the production of the country's aluminium stocks is of low grade and in the production process releases high levels of toxic waste. Key to the profitability of the privatised industry is that the company is freed from any costs and responsibility for the disposal of the huge amounts of waste products. To this end, Hungary has never introduced the type of tax known as landfill tax, which is commonplace throughout Europe.

As a result, the Hungarian newspaper *Nepszabadsag* writes, "Hungary has become a country of a thousand waste disposal sites. Dumping the red sludge costs virtually nothing: the toxic slurry is stored in a reservoir whose walls are made out of slag, ashes, or soil, and is occasionally covered with sewage-sludge or other, also harmful waste under the pretext of recultivation."

In line with industry practice, the reservoirs should be covered or cemented over when they are full of sludge. Otherwise a heavy rainfall is sufficient to cause the reservoirs to flow over. Once again, for cost reasons, this measure is hardly ever undertaken in Hungary.

In fact, neither Hungarian nor European authorities know precisely how much alumina red sludge exists in the country. Nor is there any plan or proposals for a long-term and effective disposal solution. No information is provided to those living in the vicinity of aluminium plants as to the dangers they face, and no efforts have been made to inform residents of what to do in the event of an emergency.

The devastation created in broad parts of Hungary following this latest disaster is the increasingly high price Hungarian citizens are paying for the implementation of the free market economy.



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