

Romanian Environment Record Under Scrutiny

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Bucharest commitment to improving environmental record questioned after second major chemical spill.

Romania's poor environmental record has been put under the spotlight again following the second major cyanide leak in the space of a year.

Over a hundred people, including 78 children, are recovering in hospital after eating fish contaminated by cyanide dumped in the River Siret, a Danube tributary, two weeks ago.

The incident comes barely a month after a damning EU report into the leakage of 100 million litres of cyanide-poisoned water from a mine near the town of Baia Mare at the end of January last year.

The latest crisis came after workers at a bankrupt detergent factory in the town of Lespezi, 350 km north-east of Bucharest, emptied storage tanks containing cyanide into the Siret. The factory apparently wanted to sell the vats for scrap. Two managers in charge of dismantling the containers were later arrested and charged with causing the spill.

Environment ministry officials warned that along some stretches of the river cyanide levels were 130 times higher than the legal limit.

Medical specialists said the victims of the leak were suffering from nausea and gastritis, but did not consider their condition life-threatening.

Despite public health warnings, many locals from this impoverished region are ignoring advice not to eat locally caught fish. In an attempt to prevent more people falling victim to cyanide poisoning, officials have conducted door-to-door inspections in some riverside villages, confiscating and burning three tonnes of suspect fish.

"People are aware that they can get ill, but the fish is the only free food they have," said Nicolae Trinca, head of the Iasi health authority - one of the poorest areas in Romania, where unemployment is nearly double the national average of 11 per cent .

In the aftermath of the leak, Environment Minister Aurel Ilie sacked the head of the local environmental protection agency who had waited 24 hours before reporting the spill. Ilie said that he had failed to take steps to prevent the incident.

The minister then revealed that there had been another cyanide leak at the defunct factory last December. The victims this time had been a dozen sheep.

After the Baia Mare disaster, dubbed 'Europe's worst environmental disaster since Chernobyl', an EU report stated that Romania needed an injection of \$20 billion to address safety issues.

Some 120 tons of cyanide had spilled over the Romanian border and devastated 800 km of rivers in

neighbouring Hungary and Yugoslavia.

Budapest is claiming \$110 million in compensation.

The cyanide spills have highlighted the need for Romanians to improve their environmental management practices.

Romania is home to some of the most spectacular, unspoiled beauty in Eastern Europe, but also suffers from some of the region's worst environmental degradation.

In recent years, Romania has voiced a stronger commitment to protecting its environment, but the country's ability to follow through is questionable.

Ironically, on the day of the recent spill, Romania together with Hungary called on the EU to provide them \$10 million for measures aimed at averting chemical spills.

The country continues to be plagued by air and water pollution - the latter caused by industrial and municipal wastewater discharges, agricultural runoff, and insufficient treatment of toxic pollutants.

"Romania's environmental legislation now complies over 90 percent with the EU," said an international environmental specialist. "But it lacks the analytical capacity to develop and implement policy and strategy for sustainable environmental management."

In March 2000, Romania started EU-membership talks. Brussels emphasized the need to accelerate efforts to solve its environmental problems.

Seemingly keen to turn over a new, greener, leaf, Ion Iliescu's government said it was willing to foot some of the bill for clearing up industrial pollution.

"There's much work to do, but we are headed in the right direction and the European Union appreciates this," said Ilie.

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