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Toxic Sludge in Hungary Threatens More Countries

Updated: 1 day 21 hours ago

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Contributor
AOL News Surge Desk

(Oct. 6) -- Officials from the European Union are worried that the [toxic sludge](#) that poured out of an open containment pond in Hungary on Monday will flow into the Danube River, which flows through Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Moldova before it reaches the Black Sea. The accident has already been declared an "environmental catastrophe" in Hungary, but could become an international disaster if the caustic mud reaches the Danube.

"This is a serious environmental problem," Joe Hennon, EU spokesman, [told The Associated Press](#). "We are concerned, not just for the environment in Hungary, but this could potentially cross borders."

The sludge could reach the Danube in four or five days, Sandor Toth, deputy head of the water management company for western Hungary, [told Der Spiegel](#). The country's National Disaster Unit has been pouring cement into the Marcal River – a tributary of the Danube – to try to stop the flow of noxious mud. The fish stock on the upper portion of the Marcal River has already been knocked out, according to the World Wildlife Fund in Hungary.

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"From the information I can gather, the escaped sludge would not normally be a direct threat to the Danube River, but unfortunately we are in the midst of the rainy season and it has rained especially hard in Hungary," said Andreas Beckmann, director of the WWF Danube-Carpathian Programme, in a statement. "This means that the sludge will spread faster and further and it is likely inevitable that some sludge will escape into the Danube."

The accident could take a year to clean and will cost millions of dollars, Zoltan Illes, the environment minister, [told the BBC](#). He said a layer of soil 0.8 inches deep would have to be scraped off the ground in the contaminated area. So far, the toxic river has flowed into seven towns after breaking through the reservoir walls.

Meanwhile, at least four people have been killed by the ecological disaster and at least six are still missing, according to the AP. Hundreds more have been evacuated and 120 people have been injured. Doctors warn that burns from the chemical byproduct could take a few days to appear and are expecting to see more injuries.

The sludge is a mixture of water and metal oxides, according to the BBC. Nearly half of it is iron oxide, which is why it is red. The rest is a combination of aluminum oxide, silicon oxide, calcium oxide, titanium dioxide and oxygen-bonded sodium oxide. The waste is a strong alkali, which burns the skin and is toxic if ingested. Authorities are concerned that when the mud dries, the resulting dust will be breathed in and could cause lung cancer, [the BBC reported](#).

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Emergency workers fully clad in hazmat suits with respirators continue to clean the mess. In Kolontar, they built a temporary bridge so residents could return to their homes to try to salvage some belongings.

When the reservoir initially broke on Monday, the red wave that flowed out of it came so quickly that residents in the surrounding towns had little time to flee. Kati Holtzer told the AP that it broke down her door and filled her house chest-deep in toxic muck. She had to save her 3-year-old son by putting him on top of a couch that was floating in the swirling substance. Convinced she was going to die, she called her husband to say goodbye.

Holtzer and her son were rescued, but are now suffering from chemical burns. Her dog, Mazli, who was chained up in the yard, was not so lucky.

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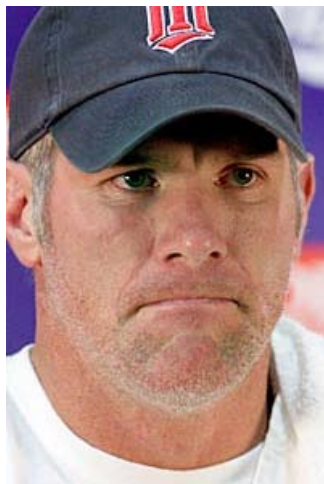
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