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# Crews struggle to clear toxic Hungary sludge flood

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By PABLO GORONDI and BELA SZANDELSZKY, Associated Press Writers – Wed Oct 6, 8:32 am ET



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ABC News – Toxic Sludge Floods Towns in Budapest

KOLONTAR, Hungary — There was no stopping the avalanche of toxic red sludge when it rammed into Kati Holtzer's home: It smashed through the main door and trapped the woman and her 3-year-old boy in a churning sea of acrid waste.

She saved her son by placing him on a sofa that was floating in the muck. She called her husband Balazs, who was working in Austria, to say goodbye.

"We're going to die," she told him, chest-deep in sludge.

After the terror came the pain: Holtzer and her two rescuers are among the 120 people suffering from biting chemical burns after Monday's torrent. Her fox terrier Mazli — "Luck" in Hungarian — lies dead in the yard, still chained to a stake.

The ecological catastrophe that is threatening the Danube River — one of Europe's main waterways — is leaving a trail of shattered lives in its wake, even as officials scrambled Wednesday to stem the flow.

Hundreds of people were evacuated Monday after a gigantic sludge reservoir burst its banks at a metals plant in Ajka, a town 100 miles (160 kilometers) southwest of Budapest, the capital.

The torrent inundated homes, swept cars off roads and damaged bridges, disgorging an estimated 1 million cubic meters (35.3 million cubic feet) of toxic waste onto several nearby towns. At least four people have been killed and three are still missing.

Emergency workers and construction crews in hazmat gear swept through the hardest-hit Hungarian towns on Wednesday, straining to clear roads and homes coated by thick red sludge and caustic muddy water.

In Brussels, the European Union said it feared the toxic flood could turn into an ecological disaster for half a dozen European nations — those downriver from Hungary along the mighty Danube — and said it stood ready to offer help.



Slideshow: Red sludge floods towns in Hungary



Video: Toxic sludge floods Hungary villages Reuters

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"This is a serious environmental problem," EU spokesman Joe Hannon told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "We are concerned, not just for the environment in Hungary, but this could potentially cross borders."

In Kolontar, the town nearest to the plant, a military construction crew worked to assemble a pontoon bridge Wednesday across a toxic stream so residents could briefly return to their homes and rescue belongings.

For two days, workers in full hazmat gear with respirators have contrasted sharply with locals, who have salvaged possessions with little more than rubber gloves as protection. Women with pants coated in the red mud have been seen clearing the muck away from their homes with snow shovels.

Red sludge is a byproduct of the refining of bauxite into alumina, the basic material for manufacturing aluminum. It contains heavy metals and is toxic if ingested. Treated sludge is often stored in ponds where the water eventually evaporates, leaving behind a dried red clay-like soil.

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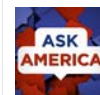
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It was still not known Wednesday why part of the reservoir failed, unleashing such an unstoppable torrent. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban says authorities were caught off guard by the disaster since the plant and reservoir had been inspected only two weeks earlier and no irregularities had been found.

Kolontar mayor Karoly Tily said Wednesday he cannot give a "reassuring answer" to residents, who fear a repeat of Monday's calamity.

Hungarian environmentalist Gergely Simon said the sludge had been accumulating in this reservoir for decades and was extremely alkaline, which caused it to burn the skin of dozens of residents.

Emergency workers, meanwhile, were pouring 1,000 tons of plaster into the Marcal River to try to bind the sludge and keep it from flowing into the Danube, 45 miles (72 kilometers) away.

At 1,775 miles (2,850 kilometers) long, the Danube is Europe's second largest river and holds one of the continent's greatest treasuries of wildlife. South of Hungary, the Danube flows through Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Moldova before emptying into the Black Sea.

The river has already been the focus of a multibillion dollar post-communist cleanup, but high-risk industries such as Hungary's Ajkai Timfoldgyar alumina plant, where the disaster occurred, are still producing waste near some of its tributaries.

MAL Rt., the Hungarian Aluminum Production and Trade Company that owns the Ajkai plant, has insisted the red sludge is not considered hazardous waste according to EU standards. The company has also rejected criticism that it should have taken more precautions to shore up the reservoir, a huge structure more than 1,000 feet (300 meters) long and 500 yards (450 meters) wide.

Hennon, the EU spokesman, said the company did have a license to operate and added "we have nothing to indicate there was anything wrong with it."

Hennon said the EU has funds available to deal with natural disasters, but it first needs to assess whether the spill was a natural disaster or a man-made calamity, which will determine how much liability the company faces.

"There are quite a few open questions and it's a bit too early to say exactly what the situation will be," Hennon said.

The current European safety standards came into effect in 2007 but the EU will reassess its law to see anything needs to be changed, he said.

"We are going to look very carefully at the outcome of what caused this, what the effects are, and then we will assess whether we do need to look again at the legislation," Hennon said.

Associated Press writer George Jahn in Vienna and Business Writer Jon Fahey contributed to this report.

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0 0

"...hungirl 47 minutes ago Report Abuse I wonder how this tragedy in Hungary connects to the american politics!..."

You see, hungirl, we have two sides here before election: one class is welfare receiving folks (many of them able but not working, "single" mothers with dozens of kids, low income families who work for cash) who like Obama and his grateful give outs, and another class, which is Carl Rove supported folks, who believe that their "uncorrupted" party members are given to US by God. Both sides are



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uneducated or plain stupid...  
And that is result... Sad for America though...

**Eefcici** 50 seconds ago | [Report Abuse](#)

0 0

I suspect middle east terrorists.

**Norbert Varga** 3 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

2 0

Some of you people here have expressed your hostile opinions about the possibility of having to pay a financial contribution to Hungary. As a Hungarian, I have to ask you when was the last time you gave a single cent or any kind of support to this much-suffered country over the past century? Let me think... NEVER! Even the aid you gave after the two WWs, had to be payed back with an enourmous interest. The last time we had the courage to ask for your help was during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, but you didn't even give it a @#\$. The consequence was 50 years of communism, suppression and poverty. As a result, we are not asking for and we are never going to ask for any kind of help, so you don't have to be worried.

**Alina** 5 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

1 0

I am sorry to hear the calamity. Hope everything goes well. Good luck to Hungarian.

**Doc R** 6 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

2 0

We can expect good results out of the criminal probe. Hungary goes to the jugular so it will not be like another BP cover-up deal.

**Anthony S** 8 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

2 0

Should've paid the Mob to truck it somewhere else. Seriously, this is why we're supposed to have that nasty old Uncle Sam's --- EPA. Notice Palin and her cronies stopped with the "Drill Baby Drill" a little while ago?

There's a reason for regulations, safety protocols and inspections. They aren't there to create jobs for lazy folks. They aren't there to run folks out of business. Noone likes oversight on them until something happens.

Sadly, no matter how many regulations and boots on the ground to oversee, there will always be some politician or government who will look the other way for a few bucks.

My thought is that Corporations aren't actually People (apologies to the Supreme Court). People should be held liable, criminally. Our govt. can't even stand to fine Corporations more than a couple days profits when we get dumped on, even if intentionally. (BP released toxic chemicals in the middle of the night a few months ago from one of its plants in Pasadena, Tx. without informing the EPA, nor the residents nearby, then said 'oopsies' when called on it. Luverly).

**Amare** 13 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

0 1

what to eat is what to dust out of once heart!!!!

**William** 15 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

4 0

How do you even begin to clean up a disaster like this? My heart goes out to the people affected by this tragedy...

**Jeremy** 16 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

0 3

So the sludge disaster isn't referring to the current administration then?

**Jean W** 20 minutes ago | [Report Abuse](#)

3 1

YouTube ,, criminal Rothschilds they own BP and half of the World they can cause any disaster for their ONE WORLD ORDER theme. They want a Global Police State and they have the money to do it!

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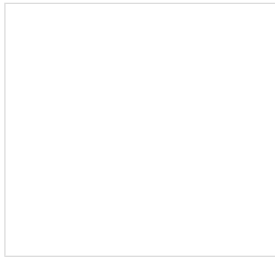
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