abcNEWS

Death Toll Rises to 3 in Hungary Sludge Flood

3 dead, 6 missing after red sludge from alumina plant floods towns in western Hungary

By BELA SZANDELSZKY

The Associated Press

DEVECSER, Hungary

A third person has died in flooding caused by the rupture of a red sludge reservoir at an alumina plant in western Hungary, rescue services said Tuesday. Six people were missing and 120 injured in what officials said was an ecological disaster.

The sludge, a waste product in aluminum production, contains heavy metals and is toxic if ingested. Many of the injured sustained burns as the sludge seeped through their clothes. Two of the injured were in life threatening condition. An elderly woman, a young man and a 3-year-old child were killed in the flooding.

The chemical burns caused by the sludge could take days to reveal themselves and what may seem like superficial injuries could later cause damage to deeper tissue, Peter Jakabos, a doctor on duty at a hospital in Gyor where several of the injured were taken, said on state television.

Seven towns, including Kolontal, Devecser and Somlovasarhely, were affected near the Ajkai Timfoldgyar plant in the town of Ajka, 100 miles (160 kilometers) southwest of Budapest, the capital.

The government declared a state of emergency in three counties affected by the flooding. Several hundred tons of plaster were being poured into the Marcal river to bind the toxic sludge and prevent it from flowing on, the National Disaster Management Directorate said.

So far, about 35.3 million cubic feet (1 million cubic meters) of sludge has leaked from the reservoir and affected an estimated area of 15.4 square miles (40 square kilometers), Environmental Affairs State Secretary Zoltan Illes told state news wire MTI.

Illes suspended the plant's activity and ordered the company to repair the damaged reservoir.

He said the incident was an "ecological catastrophe" and it was feared that the sludge could reach the Raba and Danube rivers.

MAL Rt., the Hungarian Aluminium Production and Trade Company, which owns the Ajka plant, said that according to European Union standards, the red sludge was not considered toxic waste.

"According to the current evaluation, company management could not have noticed the signs of the natural catastrophe nor done anything to prevent it even while carefully respecting technological procedures," MAL said in a statement.

On Tuesday morning, the sludge in Tunde Erdelyi's house in Devecser was still five feet (1.5 meters) high and rescue workers used an ax to cut through her living room door to let the red liquid flow out.

"When I heard the rumble of the flood, all the time I had was to jump out the window and run to higher ground," said a tearful Erdelyi, still shocked by the events but grateful that she had been able to save a family rabbit and that her cat was found wet and shivering in the attic.

Robert Kis, Erdelyi's husband, said his uncle had been taken to Budapest, the capital, by helicopter after the sludge "burned him to the bone."

The flood overturned Erdelyi's car and pushed it some 30 yards to the back of the garden while her husband's van was lifted on to a fence.

"We still have some copper in the garage that we could sell to make a living for a while," Kis said as he attempted to appraise the damage to his house and belongings. Erdelyi, a seamstress, was hoping the flood has spared the shop in town where she worked, her family's main source of income.

In neighboring Kolontal, the town closest to the aluminium plant, 61-year old widow Erzsebet Veingartner was in her kitchen when the sludge flood hit on Monday afternoon.

"I looked outside and all I saw was the stream swelling like a huge wave," said Veingartner, who lives on a monthly disability pension of 70,000 forints ($350). "Thank God I had the presence of mind to turn off the gas and run up to the attic."

Veingartner was devastated by her losses, her backyard still covered by some 3 meters (yards) of red sludge.

"I have a winter's worth of firewood in the basement and it's all useless now," said Veingartner, whose son lives in Devecser and was also suffering the consequences of the disaster. "I lost all my chickens, my ducks, my Rottweiler, and my potato patch. My late husband's tools and machinery were in the shed and it's all gone."

The disaster agency said 390 residents had to be temporarily relocated and 110 were rescued from the flooded towns, where firefighters and soldiers were carrying out cleanup tasks.

Local environmentalists said that for years they had been calling the government's attention to the risks of red sludge, which in a 2003 report they estimated at 30 million tons.

"Accumulated during decades ... red sludge is, by volume, the largest amount of toxic waste in Hungary," the Clear Air Action Group said, adding that the production of one ton of alumina resulted in two tons of toxic waste.

_____

Associated Press writer Pablo Gorondi in Budapest contributed to this report.

Copyright 2010 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed.

Copyright © 2010 ABC News Internet Ventures