

Pollution chokes famed Dal Lake in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Pollution is turning a mountain-ringed lake in Indian Kashmir into a weed-clogged swamp, hampering the recovery of tourism in the region, environmentalists say.

Dal Lake, famed for its ornately-carved cedar houseboats, is the centrepiece of Srinagar's tourist trade.

But in the past two decades it has shrunk by more than half to 11 square kilometres and lost 12 meters in depth.

"This lake is dying fast. It's turning into a swamp," says Manzoor Ahmed, a leading businessman who is spearheading a campaign to rescue the lake.

Cleaning up the lake is vital to tourism as visitors begin to return to revolt-hit Indian Kashmir amid moves by India and Pakistan to end their half-century dispute over the Himalayan territory that both claim.

Last September, a court slammed authorities for not doing enough to save the Dal Lake, saying it had become "a slum."

Gaudily-painted shikaras -- Kashmiri-style gondolas -- skim across its surface, and tourists come to stay on the brightly-hued houseboats moored on the lake.

But sewage from the more than 1,000 houseboats empties into the lake along with waste from hotels and homes on shore. Pollution is sometimes so bad it turns the lake a

brackish green.

Tests showed high levels of lead, arsenic, iron, manganese, copper and cadmium that accumulate in fish which are then consumed by humans, posing serious health risks, a government report said.

"Effects of these elements can cause damage to brain, liver and kidneys of the consumers," the report warned.

In addition to the 7,500 people living on houseboats, another 50,000 people inhabit small islands in the area.

"The lake's environmental deterioration can be attributed rightly to human settlements within and near the lake," says Shafiq-ur-Rehman, a professor at the region's agriculture university and an expert on the lake.

Aijaz Rasool, a government engineer, says three sewage plants that began operating last year have helped to ease the problem of domestic waste, but more are needed.

"Once the boats are linked up to the system, the government will take care of the sewage," says Rasool.

However, Rasool says houseboat owners have refused to hook up their waste systems to a waste disposal system because it means they would have to shift to the rear of their lake.

The houseboat owners believe the proposed new location would make their accommodation less attractive as it would be farther away

from a road frequented by tourists. This is short-sighted, says Rasool.

"If we can't clean up the lake, it will stink too much and no tourist will come," he said.

Authorities have cut down more than 500,000 trees within the lake last year to stop the decomposing leaves polluting the water.

Brightly-coloured floating vegetable gardens are also major pollutants. Dal Lake's floating gardens on reed rafts constitute one of Kashmir's biggest vegetable-producing areas.

"But pesticides used by farmers find their way into the lake, causing colossal damage to its fauna and flora," notes Rehman.

There are other obstacles to saving the lake, which is fed by springs and water from the surrounding mountains.

During the rainy summer months, silt from the mountains stripped of trees by heavy logging seeps into the lake.

The government has built a basin to stop 80,000 tonnes of silt from going into the lake yearly. "But the basin cannot catch it all," said Rasool.

"We need a sustainable and well-designed anti-pollution programme to save Dal Lake," says state lawmaker Raman Bhalla.

"Otherwise the lake faces disaster."

Mastermind, sniper jailed for Serbian PM's murder

AFP, Belgrade

A Serbian court yesterday ordered 40 year jail terms for the accused mastermind and sniper behind the 2003 assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic which sparked a major crisis in the Balkan nation.

Ten other men were jailed for up to 35 years for the killing of Djindjic outside his Belgrade office -- an act which stunned the world as it sought to encourage Serbia out of isolation after the fall of strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

"This was a political murder, a criminal deed aimed against the state," said presiding judge Nata Mesarovic reading the verdict to a packed court, which included Serbian President Boris Tadic and former members of the Djindjic cabinet.

Former police commando unit leader Milorad "Legija" Uleme, 39, was given a maximum 40-year sentence for organising the assassination of the pro-western premier.

Another unit member, Zvezdan "The Snake" Jovanovic, 41, was also jailed for 40 years. He was accused of firing the shot that felled Djindjic on March 12, 2003.

Ten other defendants were jailed for between eight and 35 years, though five are on the run. Charges were withdrawn against a 13th accused under a plea bargaining deal.

Prosecutors said all were members of the Red Berets elite police commando unit or gang members who wanted Djindjic dead so Milosevic loyalists could be brought back to power.

Bomb kills two in Baluchistan

AFP, Quetta

A time bomb hidden in a shopping bag exploded at a bus stop in gas-rich but restive southwestern Pakistan yesterday, killing two people and injuring two more, police said.

The blast happened in the remote town of Hub in Baluchistan province, near the Arabian Sea coast, police official Mohammad Siddique told AFP.

"The bomb attached to a timer was concealed in a shopping bag. Two people were killed and two were injured," he said.

No one claimed responsibility for the explosion but largely-desert Baluchistan has been gripped for more than two years by an insurgency led by autonomy-seeking tribal rebels, which has left hundreds dead.

The rebels, who mainly attack government installations, gas pipelines and electricity lines, want more political control and a greater share of the province's natural resources.

President Pervez Musharraf said on May 10 that most rebel camps had been "smashed" since the army killed rebel chief Nawab Akbar Bugti in August 2006, but reiterated an amnesty offer for tribesmen.



A team of mobile court seized unauthorised fertiliser at the office of Map Agro Industries Ltd at Uttara in the city yesterday and arrested three people in this connection.

Situation tense after family planning riots in China

AFP, Beijing

Police arrested 28 people for instigating thousands of people to riot over population control policies in southern China, state press said yesterday as locals voiced outrage over government abuse.

Seven towns in the Guangxi region erupted in violence amid tensions over fines and other punishments imposed for having too many children, Xinhua news agency said in the first official account of the unrest that began last Friday.

As many as 3,000 people protested in various villages in Guangxi region, Xinhua said, adding that government offices had been destroyed and cars and motorcycles burnt.

Residents contacted by AFP said tens of thousands of people were involved in the rioting, the worst of which took place on Friday and Saturday, while Hong Kong press reports have put the figure at 50,000.

Locals said the unrest had also spread in varying degrees to many other towns, where government work teams had ransacked homes and confiscated property from families unable to pay fines for violating family planning policies.

Residents also reported authorities forcing pregnant women to have late-term abortions, a dark practice that has been common throughout China's so-called "one-child" programme since it was first implemented in the late 1970s.

Residents said local governments last month began dispatching "family planning work teams" to levy fines of between 6,000 yuan (780 dollars) and 60,000 yuan.

The work teams also confiscated personal possessions including livestock and electronic equipment from families who could not pay.

"Every day there are villagers going to the government demanding the return of things taken from them," a woman in nearby Shuangwang township told AFP by phone following protests there on Tuesday.

The woman, who refused to give her name for fear of retribution, said fines were even being levied on families who failed to get birth permits before they became pregnant, echoing many such accusations in Internet chatrooms.

Photos initially posted on the Internet also showed government work teams dressed in military fatigues and wielding sledgehammers, smashing the homes of those who could not pay.

Xinhua said a team of 4,200 officials had been sent to 28 towns to meet residents and "deal with their complaints."

Under the population control policies, China's urban dwellers are in general allowed to have one child, while rural families can have two if the first child is a girl.

Pak capital reports new bird flu outbreak

AFP, Islamabad

A new outbreak of avian flu has struck three poultry farms in the Pakistani capital, killing 6,000 birds and forcing a cull, officials said yesterday.

The disease erupted at farms in Chak Shahzad, a suburb of Islamabad, this week. Officials said there was no case of human infection by the H5N1 virus.

"The disease at the three farms killed 6,000 birds and we culled the remaining 5,000 on Tuesday," Agriculture and Livestock Ministry spokesman Mohammad Afzal told AFP.

"The surrounding farms have been advised to immediately implement vaccination," he said.

Afzal said all workers on the affected farms were examined by the ministry of health but "none was found affected by the virus."

The disease last appeared in April in northwest Pakistan and the southern port city of Karachi, but it was quickly controlled.

The authorities in March were forced to shut an Islamabad zoo and slaughter dozens of birds, after the virus was found in peacocks and geese.

Pakistan produces 4.5 million chickens annually.



A Kashmiri man washes clothes in the waters of the world famous Dal Lake in Srinagar yesterday. Pollution is turning a mountain-ringed lake in Indian Kashmir into a weed-clogged swamp.