

Despair Runs Deep Along River

After cyanide spill,
many face bleak future

By Theresa Agovino

CHRONICLE FOREIGN SERVICE

LIVE fish have been a rare sight indeed in the Tisza River after what has been called Europe's greatest environmental catastrophe since Chernobyl. But Jozsef Torok has several netted and tethered to a tree on the waterway's muddy bank.

The flailing carp and perch symbolize Torok's hope that he'll be able to continue making his living as a fisherman, as he has done for 32 years. The 50-year-old reasons that if those fish survived the lethal doses of cyanide that pulsed through the river last week, the government may

lift the ban on fishing and work toward revitalizing the Tisza.

"When I heard the news about the cyanide spill, it was like someone put a knife in my heart," said Torok, who called the Tisza a "fish cemetery."

But, he added, "We want to bring those (netted) fish to Budapest for testing. We want to prove the fish will be OK."

Torok is one of 1.6 million people — 16 percent of Hungary's population — whose work is tied to the Tisza, a haven for both fishermen and tourists. Their livelihood has been in jeopardy since January 30, when a

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A rescue worker removed dead fish from the polluted Tisza River about 90 miles east of Budapest, Hungary.





Associated Press

European Union Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström (right) listened to a Romanian speak of the effects of cyanide pollution on his farm animals.

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deadly cocktail of cyanide and heavy metals leaked from a Romanian gold mine into the Szamos River, which flows into the Tisza.

The cyanide spilled when heavy snow and winter rain caused a holding basin to overflow at the mine. International officials say preliminary findings indicate that about 100 tons of cyanide escaped, along with tons of toxic heavy metals.

Hungarian officials say it is too soon to quantify the economic or ecological damage. But the price tag to clean a similar 1991 spill in Colorado's 20-mile-long Alamosa River was \$170 million. The Tisza runs for 125 miles in Hungary, which would put the cost at more than \$1 billion.

Serbian Environment Minister Branislav Brazic said earlier this week of the river's portion in his republic: "The whole ecosystem of the river has been destroyed. Even if we manage to return the fish there, they will have nothing to feed on because the fauna has been completely destroyed."

Signs of the devastation abound.

About 100 tons of dead fish have been pulled out of the Tisza, a popular vacation area for Hungarians that is famous for the beautiful scenery lining its banks. Tour groups are already canceling trips to Lake Tisza. Szabolc, a town on the river, has spent \$775,000 on cleanup operations.

Gabor Csoma, an owner of two small local fishing companies, says if he doesn't receive government funds so he can begin a fish breeding program, both firms will have to file for bankruptcy.

"If we start breeding now, we can have fish in the water by July," he said. "We need money. There is no other source of money but the government. Without help, the fishermen will starve."

The Hungarian government has pledged aid to those whose businesses have been hurt. In turn, Hungary is seeking compensation from the offending Baia Mare mine and Esmeralda Exploration Ltd. — an Australian firm that is one of the mine's owners — and the Romanian

NATO Bombing Started Danube's Economic Woes

The Danube River has been in the international spotlight since last spring, when NATO warplanes bombed three bridges spanning the river at Novi Sad, Yugoslavia, rendering the waterway useless for navigation from that point down and blocking crucial commercial access to the Black Sea.

Countries dependent on the Danube have sought to have the river cleared since the bombing ended last June, but the process was slowed by Yugoslavia's insistence that the clearing be linked to the rebuilding of the bridges. That stance has been abandoned and last month the Danube Commission asked the European Union for \$24 million to clear the river bed.

The clog in the Danube has had dramatic effects.

Charles Robertson, an Eastern European economic specialist at

ING Barings Ltd in London, says Bulgaria's GDP growth last year could have reached 3.5 percent instead of 2 percent if the Danube had been clear. Romania's GDP still would have fallen, but the drop would have been less severe.

Hungary's GDP growth didn't suffer but the situation is desperate for companies that rely on the river. Mahart Magyar Hajozas Rt, the state-owned shipping company, lost \$1.2 million last year and had to lay off one-sixth of its work force due to problems in the Danube.

The company's shipping director, Laszlo Koszonits, says that even if the Danube is cleared this year, he doubts the firm will make a profit until 2002 because it will have to win back clients that have switched to other shipping methods.

— Theresa Agovino



Associated Press Graphic

"The Danube has international economic implications, so you expect a quicker response with it," said Janos Zlinsky, senior adviser to the executive of the Regional Environmental Center, a nongovernmental group in Szentendre, Hungary. "But the Tisza is not an international issue. It is an issue that concerns a place of pristine natural beauty."

Of course, he is waiting to see if the flurry of pledges and promises evolve into action. "This can be a test case," he said. "How far will the Romanians go to get this solved? ... Will the international organizations continue to help?"

"The implementation of environmental legislation has always been an Achilles heel. The EU struggles with this."

Zlinsky stresses that the heavy metals left in the river bed are probably much more dangerous than the cyanide, which is now largely gone from the Tisza.

"Cyanide occurs in certain plants, so the ecosystem can deal with it," he said. "Heavy metals are more unnatural to the environment. They can't be as readily and easily dealt with."

But what worries those who live off the Tisza more is the long-term effect of newspaper photos and television footage of dead fish.

"We are going to suffer," said Torok. "People aren't going to want to eat the fish even if a doctor says it is clean."

Nonetheless, he continued mending his nets and poles for the day when he can resume fishing. "What else have I got to do?" he said.

government. In addition, Hungary has asked the European Union, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development for technical and financial support.

Esmeralda has denied responsibility for the spill, and its chairman said yesterday that there was no proof that the company was to blame.

"Quite clearly there has been contamination of parts of the river system in the region, and my heart goes out to those who may be suffering," Brett Montgomery said in a statement. "I stress, however, that there is no evidence to confirm that the contamination and the damage said to have been caused is as a result of the tailings dam overflow at Baia Mare."

Yesterday, EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström called the spill a "major environ-

mental accident, and to the people living by the rivers, a catastrophe." She added that the full impact may "come in 20 or 50 years."

The Tisza isn't the only river in Eastern Europe in need of international assistance. The Tisza flows into the Danube, so the poison is now creeping through Yugoslavia and Romania, and it is expected to arrive in Bulgaria today. Yugoslav officials have said they will seek damages from those they hold responsible, as well as aid from the international community.

The Danube has been wrestling with another crisis, since much of it was blocked to navigable traffic after NATO bombs leveled three bridges in Yugoslavia last spring. While efforts to clear the river have moved slowly, environmental activists are pleasantly surprised by the quick and seemingly sincere reaction of the international community to the cyanide spill.