

Toxic tanneries forced to move pollute new Bangladesh site

By Julhas Alam and Martha Mendoza
The Associated Press

SAVAR, Bangladesh — Bangladesh tanneries prepping leather for shoes, belts, wallets, and purses are dumping toxic chemicals into a river at a new industrial complex more than a year after the government shut them down for poisoning a different river and using child labor.

“It’s killing the river. The color of the water has changed,” Abdus Shakur, a local resident who works as a day laborer, told The Associated Press. “I have been living here for decades and the condition of the river has changed dramatically over the last year.”

Turning cow hides into soft, hair-free leather can be a dirty business, and in the Hazaribagh neighborhood of Dhaka, the former home to more than 150 tanneries, the air a year ago was so noxious with chemicals and rotting hide trimmings that it was repeatedly named one of the most polluted places on earth by environmentalists. The adjacent Buriganga River, a source of drinking water for 180,000 people, was considered poisoned.

In April 2017, under international pressure, the government shut off power at the Hazaribagh tanneries, ordering them to move to a new tannery industrial complex in Savar.



Now The AP has learned that factories at the new location are draining chemicals into the Daleshwari River and dumping toxic waste in open fields. Although there are sewage treatment and effluent systems, they are inadequate to process all of the waste.

“This was a disaster foretold,” said Richard Pearshouse, associate director of the environment program at Human Rights Watch. “Everyone convinced themselves that the main issue was technical — a lack of a central effluent

treatment plant — and not political. But Bangladesh’s tanning industry will be plagued by its fundamental problems — child labor, occupational and environmental health dangers — until government authorities finally get serious about enforcing laws.”

New York-based Transparentem, a labor-rights nonprofit group, is calling on American and European companies that sourced leather in Hazaribagh — or had items made by companies that also owned tanneries there — to help clean up the

PROCESSING POLLUTION. A Bangladeshi laborer processes leather at a factory on the banks of the Daleshwari River in Savar, Bangladesh. Bangladesh tanneries prepping leather for shoes, belts, wallets, and purses are dumping toxic chemicals into the river. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)

mess left behind. The companies include Clarks, Coach, Kate Spade, Macy’s, Michael Kors, Sears, Steven Madden, and Timberland. It is also calling on Germany-based Deichmann, a shoe and sportswear chain, and two U.S. firms — Harbor Footwear Group and Genesco — that design and market shoes in even more brands to help.

“The primary onus is on Bangladesh’s government and the leather industry to clean up Hazaribagh and prevent another full-scale environmental catastrophe in Savar,” said Transparentem president E Benjamin Skinner. “Brands that have bought from manufacturers affiliated with tanneries in either location have leverage, and thus share in the responsibility for reform.”

Undercover investigators have not followed a specific piece of leather to a particular purse or shoe. Supply chains take a few steps, sometimes dozens, to get from the source of a product to an item on a store shelf.

Transparentem is also calling on buyers to use their collective leverage to advocate

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A Thai cave, an extraordinary tale, and a captivated

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“This sets the framework for what we expect from a great story,” says Roscoe Scarborough, a sociologist at Franklin & Marshall College in Pennsylvania who studies first responders and reality television.

“Any action movie follows this script. Thinking they’re dead but they’re alive. A race against time and the odds to get them out,” says Scarborough, who is also a firefighter. “It’s a cultural product that we understand. But this is a real-life version.”

Technology helped save them

Our world today is utterly consumed with technology — witness the ability to witness a lot of this event on television and mobile devices — but also increasingly uneasy with the way it affects our lives and landscapes.

So to look at such a remote area and watch a good outcome unfold because of smart uses of technology, from the pumping effort that drained water out of the cave to the carefully calibrated oxygen tanks used in extracting the kids, illuminated the ways technology can encourage our humanity rather than whittle away at it.

Someone sacrificed everything

In any epic narrative, something precious is lost. In this case, that was 38-year-old Saman Gunan, the Thai Navy SEAL who died in the cave during rescue efforts.

This happens often in rescue efforts: People who die heroically trying to help others become martyrs who are seen as the best of us. The highest-profile example in recent years: the firefighters and police officers who died helping people on September 11, 2001.

“They become symbols of our shared humanity, representative of our collective values,” Scarborough says.

Politics were nowhere to be found.

It’s pretty obvious that our media-consuming world needs some news that couldn’t possibly be contentious or political. This story deftly managed that.

The enemies were diffuse — nature and the ticking clock. There was no backstory of refugees or immigration or gun control or economic disparity. There were, to most of the world watching, no politics whatsoever.

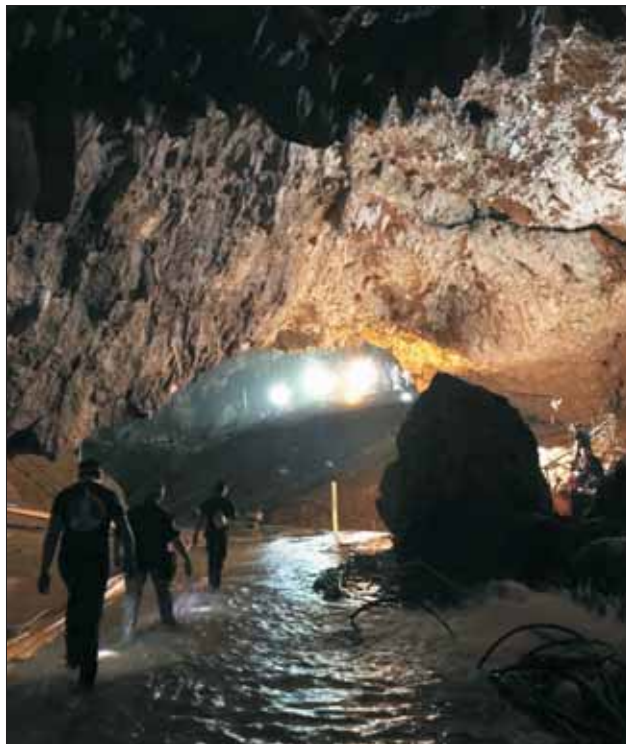
Additionally, their 2014 military coup notwithstanding, Thais are generally quiet participants in the global community.

Thus, not much to argue about.

It unfolded gradually, and time was of the essence

Serial narratives have been around for a while after their ascent in print form during the 1800s and as “cliffhangers” like “The Perils of Pauline” or “Flash Gordon” during cinema’s early days. Their calculus: They give you some of the story but leave you anticipating more. Serial podcasts and TV season finales carry on that tradition today.

In the case of the cave saga, a series of inflection points kept turning attention back to northern Thailand. The



TREACHEROUS TASK. This photo tweeted by Elon Musk shows efforts to rescue trapped members of a youth soccer team from a flooded cave in northern Thailand. Musk, who visited the cave and left a mini-submarine for potential use by rescuers, tweeted out the photo on July 10, 2018. (Photo courtesy of Elon Musk via AP)

effect, said one observer, felt like the tiny rush you get when people, one after another, like your Facebook post or Instagram photo.

And over it all hung a ticking clock. Would the waters rise again? Would oxygen run out? Would rescuers beat the countdown?

In the end, this strange summer saga in Thailand was the kind of story that a modern, media-consuming human is literally conditioned through life to consume.

It takes its place among similar underground sagas that entranced the planet — the trapped Copiapó miners (Chile, 2010); the Quecreek mining disaster (Pennsylvania, 2002), 18-month-old Jessica McClure trapped in a well (Texas, 1987); and the first such event covered by modern media, the trapping and subsequent cave death of Floyd Collins (Kentucky, 1925), where coverage featured radio bulletins and, in the spirit of the age, a popular ballad recorded on acetate disc.

Sounds antique and distant, right? But in the end it’s the same. No matter how many decades pass or how much the technology progresses, we do the same thing: We watch, we wonder, and we hope for a happy ending. And then we move on.

This time, though, in this contentious season of humanity, we can do it with a smile.

Ted Anthony, director of digital innovation for The Associated Press, was AP’s director of Asia-Pacific news from 2014 until earlier this year.

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