



POLLUTION SOLUTION. Laborers work at an aluminum-recycling factory near the Buriganga River on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh, in this August 3, 2016 file photo. Bangladesh's High Court has asked authorities to shut down 231 factories surrounding the highly polluted main river in the nation's capital, according to lawyers and activists. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad, File)

Bangladesh court orders 231 factories closed to save river

By Julhas Alam
The Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh — Bangladesh's High Court has asked authorities to shut down 231 factories surrounding the highly polluted main river in the nation's capital, lawyers and activists said.

Manzil Murshid, who filed a petition with the court seeking its intervention, said the factories are mainly small dyeing, tanning, and rubber plants operating without approval from the Department of Environment. Such factories often are able to operate with the backing of influential politicians or by bribing government officials.

The court's decision on the factories near the River Buriganga was hailed by environmental activists despite some previous court orders that were not carried out by government authorities, Murshid said.

Murshid represents Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh, a domestic advocacy group.

He said the decision came after the environment department submitted a report on 231 factories that operate illegally and contribute highly to the pollution. The court also asked the officials to prepare "a complete list of illegal factories or factories without effluent treatment plants" operating in and around Dhaka within three months.

"This is a good decision. The court has asked the authorities to disconnect water, electricity, and other utility services for factories that are polluting the Buriganga," he told The Associated Press.

Amatul Karim, who represented the Department of Environment in the case, said the court's order came after a thorough examination of the history of the factories, the level of pollution of the river, and overall damage to the environment.

"The Department of Environment has

the power to shut the factories in question, but it was not easy to do so because of the complex legal procedures and other administrative limitations. So the High Court's decision will make the work easier for the department to go ahead," Karim said.

Dhaka has four nearby rivers that are under threat from pollution. The Buriganga is a major gateway for the capital and connects the country's many southern coastal districts through a network of major rivers. When the Mughals established Dhaka as the capital in 1610, the banks of the Buriganga became a major location for trade. The river also was once Dhaka's main source of drinking water.

Many big tanneries polluted the Buriganga for decades, but under pressure from environmental groups at home and abroad, authorities relocated them to a distant site outside Dhaka in 2017.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, a prominent environmental activist and chief executive of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, said government departments lacked "adequate motivation" in doing their job properly, and the High Court needed to intervene.

"The Department of Environment does not need the court's decision to do the job, they have enough power, but I wonder why they don't do that on their own," she said. "The factories should be closed as they had enough time to become compliant but they failed."

Sheikh Rokon, general secretary of the Riverine People advocacy group, said they welcomed the court decision and efforts in recent years by the administration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to evict slums and illegal factories in Dhaka and elsewhere.

"The High Court's latest decision is a wider one. It has specifically targeted the polluters," he said. "We must save the rivers, they are our lifeline."

Philippines looks for safer homes for volcano residents

By Aaron Favila
and Jim Gomez
The Associated Press

TAGAYTAY, The Philippines — The Philippine government will no longer allow people to live on the crater-studded island that's home to the erupting Taal volcano, with officials warning that living there would be "like having a gun pointed at you."

The simmering volcano ejected smaller ash plumes for days after a gigantic eruption January 12 sent ash drifting north over Manila, the capital, about 40 miles away. While a larger, explosive eruption is still possible and tens of thousands of evacuees remain in emergency shelters, officials have begun discussing post-eruption recovery.

Interior secretary Eduardo Ano said officials in Batangas province, where the volcano is located, have been asked to look for a safer housing area, at least seven acres in size, for about 6,000 families that used to live in four villages and worked mostly as tourist guides, farmers, and fish pen operators on Volcano Island. The new housing site should be at least 10 miles away from the restive



VOLCANO VILLAGES DISBANDED. A woman walks along a park covered in volcanic ash at a town near Taal volcano in Tagaytay, Cavite province, southern Philippines. Philippine officials say the government will no longer allow villagers to return to a crater-studded island where the erupting Taal volcano lies, warning that living there would be "like having a gun pointed at you." (AP Photo/Aaron Favila)

volcano to be safe, he said.

The island was long ago designated a national park that's off limits to permanent villages. The government's volcano-monitoring agency has separately declared the island a permanent danger zone, but still, impoverished villagers have lived and worked there for decades.

"We have to enforce these regulations once and for all because their lives are at stake," Ano said, adding that closely regulated tourism work could eventually be allowed on the island without letting residents live there permanently.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has

approved a recommendation for the island to be turned into a "no man's land," but he has yet to issue formal guidelines. After an initial visit, Duterte planned to return to hard-hit Batangas province to check conditions of displaced villagers, Ano said.

The 1,020-foot-high Taal is the second most-active of 24 restive Philippine volcanoes. The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology has placed Taal at alert level 4, the second-highest warning, indicating a more dangerous explosive eruption is possible within hours or days due to continuous earthquakes, emissions of

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