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The Top 10 most toxic places on Earth — and how they got that way

The Top 10 most toxic places in the world include the Hazaribagh district in Dhaka, according to the WHO. The Star was there.



STRDEL / AFP/GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO

The Hazaribagh area of Dhaka in Bangladesh is among a 2013 list of the world's 10 most polluted places. There is the unmistakable taste of death in the place, writes The Star's Raveena Aulakh, who visited the tannery district earlier this year.

By: Raveena Aulakh Environment, Published on Tue Nov 19 2013

Hazaribagh isn't for the faint-hearted.

The densely populated, filthy neighbourhood on the banks of Buriganga river in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where almost all of that country's 200-plus tanneries are located, is a smorgasbord of lethal chemicals, toxic fumes and the unmistakable taste of death. There is chromium, there is sulphuric acid, there is lead. A World Health Organization report says most Hazaribagh's tannery workers will die before they turn 50.

It's *that* toxic.

Now, a [new report](#) by the Blacksmith Institute, a New York NGO, says Hazaribagh is one of the 10 most toxic places in the world.

[The Star in the Hazaribagh district](#)END

"It is very grim," said Jack Caravanos, a senior science adviser for the institute and one of the authors of the report.

He calls the Top 10 places the "tip of an iceberg. We have been assessing sites worldwide since 2006

and we are up to 3,000 (sites) in 49 countries,” he said, adding “that’s how many toxic places there are.”

The report estimates that industrial pollution poses a health risk to more than 200 million people, mostly through an elevated risk of cancer, respiratory illnesses and skin diseases.

Its authors pick the worst scenarios to show diversity of exposure. Caravanos said toxins, the impact on life expectancy and the number of people affected are among the determining factors when the list is compiled.

None of the 10 sites, which include river basins, dumpsites and industrial towns, are in North America.

Topping the list this year is Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana, a dumpsite that is the second-largest e-waste processing area in West Africa.

Ghana is one of the biggest importers of second-hand electronics, which are then stripped down. Anything that can be salvaged, is.

In Agbogbloshie, the report says, “the primary activity of concern” is the burning of sheathed cables to recover copper. Among other things, cables contain lead. When plastic is burned off copper wires, the smoke is extremely toxic, said Caravanos.

Samples taken around in and around Agbogbloshie show a heavy presence of lead.

Caravanos, who has visited the dumpsite four times, says “there have been many problems with intervention.”

The world's 10 most toxic places

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Chernobyl in Ukraine, at No. 2, is back on the list because the concrete tomb that covers the reactor is disintegrating. The consensus is that if it is not sealed, radiation will be released, said Caravanos.

“There is no plan that we know of to keep the radiation in,” Caravanos said.

In 1986, Chernobyl was the site of the worst nuclear disaster in history. It was on the most toxic list in 2006.

But not every toxic site is a continuing problem.

Significant progress has been made in many places that previously made the list, the report acknowledges. In the Dominican Republic's Haina, naming and shaming has produced positive results.

Caravanos said a lead battery recycling plant was located in the middle of a community in Haina. "When workers took the plates out and melted them, they contaminated themselves and the land."

Now, the site has been completely remediated. Lead levels in the blood of children who live in and around the site are almost back to normal.

"We want to clean up the sites by identifying them, so that governments, manufacturers are put on notice," Caravanos said, adding there is quick follow up.

"The World Bank, European Union or private foundations . . . they give money to clean up."

In Hazaribagh, Richard Pearshouse, a researcher with Human Rights Watch who produced a [damning report](#) on the Bangladesh tanneries district last year, calls it an example of extreme, almost post-apocalyptic pollution.

"Each time I would spend a few days researching in Hazaribagh, I developed health issues: skin rashes, stomach problems, a bad cough," he said.

"Local residents and workers suffer far worse health conditions, and economic pressures mean they can't stop work or move away."

The top 10 most toxic places in the world:

Agbogbloshie, Ghana

Chernobyl, Ukraine

Citarum River, Indonesia

Dzershinsk, Russia

Hazaribagh, Bangladesh

Kabwe, Zambia

Kalimantan, Indonesia

Matanza Riachuelo, Argentina

Niger River Delta, Nigeria

Norilsk, Russia