

Toxic Spill Cuts Off Drinking Water To 500,000 Chinese

Elaine Kurtenbach, Associated Press

SHANGHAI (AP) — A toxic chemical spilled into a river that supplies drinking water to the scenic city of Hangzhou in eastern China, knocking out supplies to more than half a million people and creating a run on bottled water.

A tanker truck carrying 20 tons of carbolic acid overturned late Saturday night. The chemical, also known as phenol, was washed by rain into the Xin'an River about 150 kilometers (90 miles) southwest of Hangzhou, the city said in a report on its website.

The city said an emergency worker died, but did not say how. It said authorities temporarily shut down waterplants and released extra water from nearby dams to dilute the spill, which affected the water supplies of at least 552,000 people in Hangzhou's suburbs.

The concentration of carbolic acid near the accident site remained more than 900 times the safe drinking level as of late Monday, the report said.

Local officials did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Carbolic acid is an industrial chemical used to create plastic and other materials. Contact with it can cause burns and ingesting it can cause damage to internal organs and the nervous system. No details were available on the exact level of contamination in the water supply.

Despite assurances that drinking water in Hangzhou itself was safe, residents rushed to buy bottled water, leaving shelves in some supermarkets empty. Local reports showed shoppers hauling away crateloads of water.

Meanwhile, water supplies to parts of Yuhang, a district in another area of Hangzhou, were suspended after environmental regulators discovered that tap water was contaminated by 10 types of industrial chemicals including benzene discharged by factories upstream from the city.

Water trucks were being sent in and schools were closed for three days starting Tuesday as regulators sought to dilute the contamination by shutting down the polluting factories and releasing water from an upstream reservoir, the district government said in a statement.

It did not say what kinds of factories were responsible for the pollution, but noted that the source was an industrial park near a reservoir that provides water to the area.

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Hangzhou, a city of 9 million people, is famed for its scenic West Lake district, its tea plantations and for picturesque surrounding mountains. City officials are said to be planning to apply for it to be designated a U.N. World Heritage site.

Hangzhou is also a major center for textile manufacturing and the capital of Zhejiang province, one of China's most affluent and industrial regions.

The spill follows recent reports of lead poisoning of dozens of people caused by emissions from battery manufacturers based northeast of the city. That case came amid a widening crackdown on heavy metals pollution that resulted in shutdowns of hundreds of factories.

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Associated Press research assistant Fu Ting contributed to this report.

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