

ASIA PACIFIC

Vietnam Floods Kill 17 and Threaten to Pollute Ha Long Bay

By AUSTIN RAMZY JULY 30, 2015

Flooding in northern Vietnam has killed at least 17 people, with the continuing rain prompting concerns of landslides and of pollution from inundated coal mines reaching one of the country's most famous sites of natural beauty.

A Vietnamese Navy vessel was sent to Co To Island, off the northeast coast, to rescue about 1,500 tourists who had been stranded since the weekend because of severe weather, Tuoi Tre News, a state-run agency, reported on its website on Thursday.

Heavy rain began falling in the northern province of Quang Ninh on Sunday. Fourteen people were killed in the city of Ha Long and three in the city of Cam Pha, according to the state news media.

Environmental groups said that Cam Pha was flooded with waste from nearby coal mines and that the material could threaten Ha Long Bay, a Unesco World Heritage site famous for its steep limestone islands.

"I think that the water pollution will be very severe," said Nguy Thi Khanh, executive director of the Green Innovation and Development Center in Hanoi, the capital. Ms. Khanh said that she did not know how much material had flowed out of mines or whether any had reached the bay, as the flooding had made access impossible, but that contamination was likely.

"The water quality of the bay will be affected because the water from contaminated coal mine will flow into the sea," she said.

Three coal-fired power plants and three open-pit mines are within 30 miles of the bay, according to a map from the Waterkeeper Alliance, a New York-based environmental group.

“My understanding is it is a living nightmare for the people of the region,” said Donna Lisenby, a Waterkeeper Alliance official who visited the area last year. “There is a deluge of coal waste pouring off those giant open-pit coal mines.”

The waste poses a risk to plants and animals in Ha Long Bay, as it could kill off phytoplankton, leaving other creatures without a source of food, Ms. Lisenby said. Heavy metals like arsenic, cadmium and lead could cause long-term damage to human and environmental health.

Ms. Khanh said she thought the government was working hard to save lives but was struggling with the environmental repercussions. “I think the local authorities and central government have resources to support the people, but it’s difficult to control the coal in the water because it is flooded,” she said.

The National Hydro-Meteorological Service of Vietnam said more rain was expected, with the possibility of flash floods and landslides in northern provinces through Tuesday.

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