

Thailand totters towards waste crisis

September 1 2014, by Aidan Jones



Locals cover their noses as they ride past a vast rubbish dump in the Praeksa district on the outskirts of Bangkok on April 29, 2014

A blaze at a vast rubbish dump home to six million tonnes of putrefying trash and toxic effluent has kindled fears that poor planning and lax law enforcement are tipping Thailand towards a waste crisis.

Locals had long pressed for the closure of the foul-smelling Praeksa landfill site, which is wedged between a cluster of industrial estates on the fringes of Bangkok.

But a ferocious eight-day fire that cloaked the eastern suburbs of the capital in poisonous smoke earlier this year thrust Praeksa to the heart of a national debate over rubbish.

Bangkok—a sprawling city of 12 million and counting—produces around 10,000 tonnes of waste a day, a substantial portion of the 27 million tonnes generated each year across the kingdom.

The ruling junta has put [waste disposal](#) high on its to-do list, recognising that poorly regulated pits are fast filling up and prone to disaster.

But Thailand is not alone in struggling to tame its trash.

From Jakarta's Bantar Gebang dump to Manila's 'smokey mountain', open landfills blight Southeast Asia's booming megacities, as urban planners labour to keep pace with rapid urbanisation and industrial growth.

Experts warn those dumps are a timebomb for the environment and the increasing number of communities forced to live cheek-by-jowl with them.

Open dumping "offers a quick and easy solution in the short run," the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific says in a study, warning of severe environmental problems and long-term health issues caused by [contaminated water](#) and land.

'Close the dump'

Of Thailand's 2,500 open rubbish pits, just a fifth are properly managed, according to the kingdom's Pollution Control Department.

The rest are at the mercy of illegal dumping—including of hazardous

waste—fires and seepage into nearby land and water systems.

The department says the mid-March blaze at Praeksa, which has caught fire several times since, was just one of 10 raging every month at dumps across a kingdom.



Workers remove rubbish with heavy machinery at a vast rubbish dump in the Praeksa district on the outskirts of Bangkok on April 29, 2014

A lack of enforcement is to blame, says Nicha Rakpanichmanee of Ecological Alert and Recovery Thailand (EARTH), explaining the whole waste disposal chain is skewed towards "anyone who can pay".

She says that 1.9 million tonnes of toxic waste goes unaccounted for after leaving factory gates every year, with many factory owners flouting

laws to save on the costs of safe disposal and tip operators willing to turn a blind eye to the illegal dumping of toxic run-off.

"The people who will remain with the problems are the poorest who cannot move," she says of the communities forced to live with contaminated water and land.

For residents near Praeska, in Samut Prakan province neighbouring Bangkok, the intensity of the blaze has left them in little doubt that inflammable chemicals swash around the fetid mounds of trash.

The tip is meant for household waste only.

"I want it closed," said 85-year-old local resident Jad Pimsorn. "I have lived with it but I don't want my children and grandchildren to live with it too."

The dump operator denied he had allowed chemicals to be illegally stashed at his site.

"But there were several companies operating the pit before me," Krompol Samutsakorn told AFP.

Trash talk

Until the Praeksa blaze, talking about trash was a conversation few wanted to have.

Currently Thai households pay less than half a dollar a month to get rid of their waste.



Workers remove rubbish with heavy machinery at a vast rubbish dump in the Praeksa district on the outskirts of Bangkok on April 29, 2014

Local authorities say that leaves them short of cash to invest in modern, environmentally friendly incinerators or recycling plants, but they are reluctant to raise rates on would-be voters in already poor neighbourhoods.

That could be about to change, with military ruler General Prayut Chan-O-Cha vowing to tackle the kingdom's garbage problems.

"Can people throw away garbage in outer space?" he asked in a typically enigmatic weekly television address to the nation on August 8.

"They cannot... they have to throw it away in Thailand."

The comments from the can-do junta chief have raised hopes of a policy

revival towards waste after years of short-term planning—abetted by short-lived governments—in the politically turbulent kingdom.

Fearing landfills are incubating massive [health issues](#) down the line, the Pollution Control Department wants to see collection rates raised locally and laws tightened to encourage recycling.



Locals cover their noses as they ride past a vast rubbish dump in the Praeksa district on the outskirts of Bangkok on April 29, 2014

One solution is better facilities to compost organic waste—especially in places such as Thailand where nearly half of the daily 1.1 kilograms of household waste produced per person is bio-degradable.

As they heave a wheelie-bin full of rotting food and broken beer bottles into the back of a rubbish truck, a group of Bangkok binmen say Thais

must change their habits or live with the consequences.

"It is hard to solve the problem," said Wutthichai Namuangrak, seemingly inured to the sickly-sweet stench rising from the back of the truck.

"We can help by collecting the trash, but people cannot just rely on us."

© 2014 AFP

Citation: Thailand totters towards waste crisis (2014, September 1) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-09-thailand-totters-crisis.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--