

Indonesian lives risked on 'world's most polluted' river

September 7 2012, by Vincent Souriau



A man paddles his raft at the Citarum river at the Cijeruk village in Bandung. Labelled "the most-polluted in the world" by a local commission of government agencies and NGOs charged with its clean-up, the river is the only source of water for 15 million Indonesians who live on its banks, despite the risks to health and crops.

With dozens of bright green rice paddies, flocks of kites in the sky and children laughing nearby, at first glance the village of Sukamaju in western Java has all the charms of rural Indonesia.

But the idyllic setting is spoiled by a strong stench rising from the Citarum river that flows in the distance, thick with mounds of garbage and [plastic bags](#) dumped on its banks.

This immense aquatic rubbish bin winds 297 kilometres (185 miles) across the island of Java, cutting through the sprawling Indonesian capital, Jakarta.

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In the village of Sukamaju, not far from the bustling West Java capital of Bandung, a well at a small village square serves as a public shower. Without any other water source in the village, it is connected directly to the canal.

Noor, a villager in her 40s, has had white patches on her arms for the past six months.

"When I first started itching, it was always after washing here. It's because of the [contaminated water](#) in the river. It's the factories' fault," she said.

"I don't know what this disease is, but I don't have any money to see a doctor."

The Bandung Basin is the historic centre of Indonesia's [textile industry](#), where 1,500 factories in the region dump 280 tonnes of toxic waste each day into the Citarum.

In the irrigation canals of Sukamaju, between the rice paddies, the water

for crops that runs through the fields is a puzzling deep red verging on black.



An Indonesian scavenger collecting recycled items in Citarum river at the Jelegong village in Bandung. Labelled "the most-polluted in the world" by a local commission of government agencies and NGOs charged with its clean-up, the river is the only source of water for 15 million Indonesians who live on its banks, despite the risks to health and crops.

"This is because of the dyes from the factories. The colour changes every two hours (depending on dyes being washed out), and that has a

direct impact on the quality of the rice," complained Deni Riswandani, as he dissected a young sprig.

"There are no more grains in the pods. Production has been reduced 50 percent from the normal harvest," said Riswandani, who is trying to bring farmers together to lobby for financial compensation.

At the edge of the plantation stands a massive grey building equipped with several chimneys and surrounded by barbed wire. On the coast, a valve connected to the factory dumps toxic residue at regular intervals right by the [rice paddies](#).

"Normally, factories can't dispose waste into the water without treating it," Riswandani said. "In theory, there are very heavy penalties for doing this, but the government pretends there are regular checks. But on the ground nothing changes."

According to Windya Wardhani, head of the West Java provincial environment bureau: "We practice intensive control, and I think that gradually the factories will comply with the rules. But perhaps not every day," she said.

"There are heavy metals in the Citarum's water and sediment, probably because of the factories, since you don't find heavy metals in rubbish."

She said the river contained mercury, lead, zinc and chrome, which have been linked to cancer, organ damage and even death, affecting babies and children more severely.

Mercury and lead can cause joint disease, such as rheumatoid arthritis, and diseases of the kidneys, circulatory system and nervous system, studies show.

Residents have sought compensation for their damaged rice crops, while the health effects of the river have gone unaddressed, with no data yet gathered to measure the extent of the problem.

The Indonesian Textiles Association asserts that the industry's contribution to the river's pollution is no more than 15 to 25 percent.

"It comes mostly from domestic waste and plastic. It is unfair to assume it's all us. It's easy to count the number of factories, but who's counting the number of people who live along the river and throw their waste in the water?" said Kevin Hartanto, head of the Bandung chapter of the textile association.

Cleaning up the Citarum river and its 22 streams has been classified a national priority by the Indonesian government, which in 2010 launched a huge 15-year project to rehabilitate the river.

Largely financed by the private sector, this "road map" involves dozens of NGOs, seven ministries and 12 local governments, amounting to a total of \$3.5 billion. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) will contribute \$500 million.

According to Thomas Panella, an ADB water resources specialist, progress has so far been minimal.

"At this point there has been little improvement because it's been a very short time (in which) to address the pollution issues," he said.

"We need to look at lessons of countries like France, the US and Korea that had incredibly polluted waterways in the first part of this century. You would think at that time it was not possible to address these things. You have to have a long-term vision."

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