
Swaziland: Paper mill pollutes river and people

Residents south of the Matsapha Industrial Estate, where the nation's manufacturing sector is based, recently complained of ailments resulting from the consumption of "poison" water from the Lusushwana river. The river is clean when it flows out of Mantenga Nature Reserve, but then it passes through the Matsapha industries where its colour changes, according to residents who depend on the river for their water needs. "It is brown one day, grey the next," said Thab'sile Dlamini, who lives in an informal settlement that has sprung up along the riverbank. The head teacher at Mthonjeni Primary School has reported widespread stomach ailments among students, though no fatalities. Two-thirds of Swazis live below the poverty line and many still source their water from nearby streams. Residents blamed several factories operating in the area, including Swazi Paper Mills.

The Swaziland Environmental Authority (SEA) was established seven years ago under the Ministry of Tourism to monitor compliance with environmental laws in a country where a largely peasant population is dependent on untreated water hand-drawn from rivers. Rather ineffective for the first five years of its existence, it has recently surprised environmentalists by threatening to shut down one of the country's oldest industries when it discovered chemical effluents originating from Swazi Paper Mills that flowed into the river via a canal leading through a power station. The director of SEA, Jameson Vilakati, investigated the mill and reported: "They did not deny anything, but stated that a certain machine was not functioning, which forced untreated waste material to be deposited into the river." Vilakati added that an SEA directive would compel the company to shut down operations until the discharge problem is fixed.

This has been a signal to Swazi Paper Mills that the approval of permits and expansion plans -- for a new planned paper pulp and wood-chip mill-- in future will be tied to a company's environmental record.

"This is a new reality," said a SEA source. "Before, it was 'anything goes'. Swaziland wanted to attract industry, and we had what seemed to be unlimited land and rivers, which most people took for granted. We're now running out of resources, and conservation is essential." Unfortunately, polluted rivers and ill people have had to bear witness of that.

As usually happens, polluters are portrayed --prior to "accidents"-- as environmentalists. Swazi Paper Mills is no exception. The Swaziland Business Year Book 2003 describes the company in the following way: "Corporate responsibility in terms of the environment is a key consideration ..." The fact that "a certain machine was not functioning" and that untreated waste material --meaning highly toxic effluents-- was being knowingly discharged into the river shows the true meaning of "corporate responsibility" and the importance of government control over corporations' activities.

Article based on information from: "Swaziland: Environment authority shows its teeth", IRIN, <http://irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=33726> ; Swaziland Business Year Book 2003, <http://www.swazibusiness.com/sbyb2003/index.php?f=09>

