

Hungary: the colours after disaster

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Commissioner Georgieva's Blog: I had long planned a visit to Hungary, to discuss my policy proposal for strengthening our disaster response with the upcoming EU Presidency. Then, the accident in Ajka happened, and response to this specific disaster took central stage. The place to talk about it was not a conference room, but the affected area, still covered in sludge.

Once we entered the Veszprém county, the gentle colours of autumn that rolled past the car windows were replaced by one colour – red. This is the colour of the mud that had spilled from the reservoir of the Ajka factory, and swept through the fields, yards and houses.

Two weeks after the disaster struck, killing nine people and injuring more than a hundred, this colour still dominates the landscape, painting a bizarre picture of red rivers, red roads, red-coated earth. But this is not a Martian landscape or a chaotic situation – red mud certainly does not paint the whole picture on the ground.

White is the other colour that has infused that area, after the red deluge. This is the colour of the protective overalls worn by recovery workers. These white figures have spent much of the past two weeks in the red mud, preventing the sludge from spilling into more lives, rivers and fields, and planning the next steps toward a comprehensive rehabilitation programme.

An enormous amount of work has been done in this white effort to neutralise the red. Hundreds of people were evacuated to safety; reinforcements were built to contain further spills (which luckily did not happen); rigorous chemical probes were taken from water, soil and air; heavy duty machines were brought in to clear the debris.

The problems are hardly over, but thanks to the fast and concerted initial reaction, at the moment the situation is under control, and the Hungarian authorities are beginning the second phase of disaster management – recovery. I am optimistic that another colour will soon come after the red and the white – green, just like in the Hungarian flag. The green of recovering nature, and renewed hope.

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