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News » Pollution clouds Gambia's efforts to woo China

Pollution clouds Gambia's efforts to woo China

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Representative image.

GAMBIA: The [Gambia](#) is courting Beijing's attention after re-establishing diplomatic relations last year, but villagers and activists say Chinese investment is a double-edged sword as they fight a firm accused of dumping [waste](#).

Chinese firms in [Africa](#) are frequently accused of polluting the environment to produce materials ready to export back

home, in incidents recorded by experts across the mines of Guinea, oil fields of Chad and forests of the Congo basin.

The government is nevertheless keen to kickstart direct Chinese investment to turn around the stuttering economy, though its environment agency has made clear it will tackle abuses of the delicate ecosystem in this largely undeveloped west African nation.

weicomed the opening of a Chinese fishmeal factory in September 2016, hoping it would bring new jobs to an area reliant on scant rewards from fishing and tourism.

"When the factory came here, a lot of people were happy, including me," said Badara Bajo, the director of the Environment Protection and Development Group of Gunjur (EPDGG), a charity.

"We felt that it would help create employment opportunities and perhaps sustainable income to local inhabitants," he explained, describing his impressions of the Chinese-run Golden Lead company.

Banjul recognised Beijing as the seat of China's government over former ally Taiwan in March 2016, but the Asian giant was already one of the diminutive African state's top trading partners, with the Chinese snapping up valuable rosewood timber exports.

Illegal to export in neighbouring Senegal, the prized wood was smuggled over the border into The Gambia from the southern Senegalese region of Casamance, souring relations with Dakar.

Since President Adama Barrow took power in January, Banjul has engaged in a charm offensive with Chinese businesses, seeking funding for the type of infrastructure and energy projects the government says were neglected under former leader Yahya Jammeh.

Barrow praised Trade Minister Isatou Touray last week for signing an agreement for duty-free trade with China, which he said would "make our goods more competitive, and boost our export potential."

Touray herself told Chinese media at a regional summit in Abuja in May that "quite a number of Chinese firms are currently engaging with the new administration and we are moving in the right direction."

Within months of the factory opening in Gunjur, residents began to notice a bad smell, followed by local waterways turning red, and finally wave after wave of dead fish washing up on the shore. Swimmers in Gunjur's lagoon began to complain of skin problems.

"The factory is very close to the lagoon. The lagoon is also close to the nature reserve which we have managed for 22 years now," Bajo said.

Alerted to allegations of waste being piped directly into the sea and the destruction of some the area's mangroves, the National Environment Agency (NEA) filed a lawsuit against Golden Lead on June 14.

Bajo and his colleagues also organised a protest in late May in the neighbouring village of Kartong, where another Chinese firm has its sights set on a factory.

Lamin Jatta, a Kartong resident, said the community "would not allow the [Chinese company](#) to pollute our environment, as this will drive European tourists from our beaches."

Cases like Gunjur's are test sites for the new government's willingness to tolerate what experts have described as Chinese firms' frequent disregard for the environment and the rule of law in other parts of Africa.

In its charges against Golden Lead, the NEA alleged that the Chinese company was discharging waste water from their processing plant into the sea at Gunjur beach without permission.

Golden Lead was also failing to keep records of its activities and waste management as required by Gambian law, it said.

Nevertheless, both sides agreed an out-court-settlement, with the firm promising to clean up its act, said government spokeswoman Amie Bojang-Sissoho.

"The company will remove its pipes from the sea and will make a comprehensive ecological assessment and restore the damage done to the ecology," she said, adding Golden Lead would "pay for testing of the water to know how and why it was affected."

Bakary Darboe, the managing director of the Golden Lead Company, said he "rejected the charges" despite the legal agreement, and noted that the firm employed 64 people in the area to make animal feed to be exported back in China.

After all, not everyone in Gunjur is incensed by the presence of Golden Lead.

"Unlike the local fishmongers who buy fish on credit basis, the Chinese pay in cash and take the fish," said Aliou Saine, a Senegalese fisherman who said the firm paid up to \$2 million dalasi (\$43,401) each time they purchased stock.

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The villagers, he added, would "get used to" the smell, as he had.

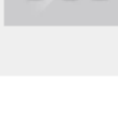
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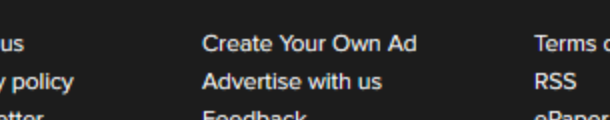
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