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World Bank OKs \$164 mln for Azerbaijan oil cleanup

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WASHINGTON, June 17 (Reuters) - The World Bank on Tuesday approved three projects worth \$164 million to clean up Azerbaijan's Absheron Peninsula, polluted by years of onshore oil production and posing health risks to millions of people who live in the area.

The area is among the 10 most polluted places in the world, according to the Blacksmith Institute, a New York non-profit group.

Decades of industrial operations have left about 30,000 hectares of land in the peninsula polluted by oil products and industrial waste material, the World Bank said. The area is one of the oldest oil-producing regions in the world.

The World Bank said the area's waste management system was unable to collect and dispose of about 60 percent of solid waste produced in the area, which has prevented the expansion of the cities of Baku and Sumgayit that are ringed by polluted zones.

"These three projects are a part of a historical effort Azerbaijan is undertaking to improve the ecological situation of the Absheron Peninsula, and particularly to bring ecological conditions in Baku to European standards," Gregory Jedrzejczak, the World Bank's country manager for Azerbaijan, said.

One of the projects will include cleaning up two former iodine production sites in Ramany and Surakhani and building a special radioactive storage facility.

Another will help the state oil company SOCAR carry out a massive cleanup of oil-polluted land by providing soil cleaning equipment.

The third will strengthen the capacity of a new solid waste management company and help clean up informal waste dumps. (Reporting by Lesley Wroughton; Editing by Leslie Adler)

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