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Swat River Pollution Rises Amid Hotel Boom in K-P

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The unchecked construction of hotels along the riversides in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (K-P) is increasingly polluting water bodies, particularly the Swat River, raising serious environmental and health concerns.

For decades, tourists have flocked to Swat and Kalam to enjoy mountain views and riverside stays. However, the rising demand for scenic accommodations has come at a cost. With limited regulation, hundreds of hotels now discharge wastewater and solid waste directly into rivers, affecting water quality and aquatic life.

Residents and tourists alike have noted visible changes. Rafiq Lala, a longtime resident of Mingora, recalled a time when visitors enjoyed fishing by the river. “Now, sewage from hotels flows straight into the Swat River. The water isn’t safe anymore,” he said.

Zehra, a repeat tourist over the last 13 years, expressed disappointment. “The water used to be clear. Now, it’s murky and lifeless. I haven’t seen fish here for years.”

Research conducted two years ago by environmental experts from five K-P universities, including the University of Peshawar, confirmed the presence of high levels of methylmercury, a toxic compound. Water, fish, and even human hair and nail samples from Swat tested 6% above the World Health Organization’s recommended limit.

Former Environmental Sciences Professor Mohammad Rafiq warned that levels exceeding one micro cubic meter can lead to serious health issues. “We’re seeing cases of organ damage, typhoid, and gastrointestinal illnesses linked to this contamination,” he stated. He cited concrete particles, restroom cleaning agents, and construction debris as key sources of pollution.

Data from the K-P Irrigation Department shows around 1,600 hotels in the Swat Valley, with 300 more in Kalam alone. The Swat River stretches 240 kilometers, passing areas such as Mingora, Bahrain, and Khwazakhela. At several of these points, over 200 hotels contribute directly to pollution.

Despite the scale of the issue, enforcement has been weak. In the last five to eight years, little meaningful action was taken. However, in recent months, authorities have issued notices to 160 hotels, sealed 15, and warned 40 others.

Commissioner Swat, Abid Wazir, explained that legal barriers prevent the demolition of many riverside hotels, though the K-P River Protection Act forbids construction within 200 feet of riverbanks. Chief Secretary Shahab Ali Shah confirmed that a temporary ban on new hotel construction is in place.