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President Dmitry Medvedev said on Thursday Russia had accumulated more than 30 billion tonnes of hazardous waste, calling on businesses to contribute to the country's environmental clean-up.

Speaking in Dzerzhinsk, site of Cold War-era factories producing chemical weapons ranked as one of the world's most polluted cities, the Kremlin chief said many of Russia's ecological problems dated back to the Soviet era.

"More than 30 billion tonnes of dangerous waste have been accumulated across the country by now," Medvedev said after a helicopter flyover of the city named after Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the feared Bolshevik secret police.

"There are plenty of environmental problems, both new as well as those inherited from the past. To be honest, we've inherited more from the past," he said, adding "the scale of the environmental disaster" in the city was impressive.

The governor of Russia's oil-rich northern region of Yamalo-Nenetsk said that pollution is getting worse over the entire country.

"In 40 Russian regions, over half of the population lives highly polluted atmosphere," governor Dmitry Kobylykin said.

Since Soviet industrial polluters have long since ceased to exist, it's not easy to clean up after them, he said. "One can say that we lived borrowing from the future generations all this time. It's time to pay back the debt," he said.

Dzerzhinsk is one of the cities now battling such heritage: the city of 300,000 was a secret defence manufacturing center in Soviet times and landed on the list of top 10 most polluted places in the world compiled by the Blacksmith Institute in 2007.

Medvedev said Russia should take its cue from its neighbours when it comes to environmental protection, adding Russian businesses should help the state clean up the country.

Speaking to a meeting attended by top officials as well as businesspeople like billionaire Oleg Deripaska, Medvedev said business should understand that such projects "would not be too burdensome and can bring advantages in some cases."

The day earlier Medvedev gathered environmental activists for a meeting at a Kremlin garden, praising them for their "very tough and demanding position."

Ecologists are routinely harassed in Russia where authorities often turn a blind eye to violations.

The first post-Soviet years left little room for environmental concerns which were also pushed to the back burner by the subsequent oil and gas boom.

From Dzerzhinsk, Medvedev plans to travel to the nearby Volga city of Nizhny Novgorod for two days of talks with EU leaders.

AFP Sciences

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