

Belatedly, Egypt Spots Flaws in Wiping Out Pigs



Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times

Pigs were the champion garbage consumers in Cairo. Other animals just don't seem up to the task.

By MICHAEL SLACKMAN

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CAIRO — It is unlikely anyone has ever come to this city and commented on how clean the streets are. But this litter-strewn metropolis is now wrestling with a garbage problem so severe it has managed to incite its weary residents and command the attention of the president.

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Shawn Baldwin for The New York Times
A zabaleen carrying a load of cardboard. The zabaleen no longer go door to door collecting organic waste, which they fed to pigs.

The pigs used to eat tons of organic waste. Now the pigs are gone and the rotting food piles up on the streets of middle-class neighborhoods like Heliopolis and in the poor streets of communities like Imbaba.

“The problem is clear in the streets,” said Haitham Kamal, a spokesman for the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs. “There is a strict and intensive effort now from the state to address this issue.”

But the crisis should not have come as a surprise.

When the government [killed all the pigs](#) in Egypt this spring — in what public health experts said was a misguided attempt to combat [swine flu](#) — it was warned the city would be overwhelmed with trash.

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Ramadan Hediya, 35, who makes deliveries for a supermarket, lives in Madinat el Salam, a low-income community on the outskirts of Cairo.

“The whole area is trash,” Mr. Hediya said. “All the pathways are full of trash. When you open up your window to breathe, you find garbage heaps on the ground.”

What started out as an impulsive response to the swine flu threat has turned into a social, environmental and political problem for the Arab world’s most populous nation.

It has exposed the failings of a government where the power is concentrated at the top, where decisions are often carried out with little consideration for their consequences and where follow-up is often nonexistent, according to social commentators and government officials.

“The main problem in Egypt is follow-up,” said Sabir Abdel Aziz Galal, chief of the infectious disease department at the Ministry of Agriculture. “A decision is taken, there is follow-up for a period of time, but after that, they get busy with something else and forget about it. This is the case with everything.”

Speaking broadly, there are two systems for receiving services in Egypt: The government system and the do-it-yourself system. Instead of following the channels of bureaucracy, most people rely on an informal system of personal contacts and bribes to get a building permit, pass an inspection, get a driver’s license — or make a living.

“The straight and narrow path is just too bureaucratic and burdensome for the rich person, and for the poor, the formal system does not provide him with survival, it does not give him safety, security or meet his needs,” said Laila Iskandar Kamel, chairwoman of a community development organization in Cairo.

Cairo’s garbage collection belonged to the informal sector. The government hired multinational companies to collect the trash, and the companies decided to place bins around the city.

But they failed to understand the ethos of the community. People do not take their garbage out. They are accustomed to seeing someone collecting it from the door.

For more than half a century, those collectors were the zabaleen, a community of Egyptian Christians who live on the cliffs on the eastern edge of the city. They collected the trash, sold the recyclables and fed the organic waste to their pigs — which they then slaughtered and ate.

Killing all the pigs, all at once, “was the stupidest thing they ever did,” Ms. Kamel said, adding, “This is just one more example of poorly informed decision makers.”

When the swine flu fear first emerged, long before even one case was reported in Egypt, President [Hosni Mubarak](#) ordered that all the pigs be killed in order to prevent the spread of the disease.

When health officials worldwide said that the virus was not being passed by pigs, the Egyptian government said that the cull was no longer about [the flu](#), but was about cleaning up the zabaleen’s crowded, filthy, neighborhood.

That was in May.

Today the streets of the zabaleen community are as packed with stinking trash and as clouded with flies as ever before. But the zabaleen have done exactly what they said they would do: they stopped taking care of most of the organic waste.

Instead they dump it wherever they can or, at best, pile it beside trash bins scattered around the city by the international companies that have struggled in vain to keep up with the trash.



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Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 22, 2009

A picture caption on Sunday with an article about the garbage crisis in Cairo, caused by the Egyptian government's misguided campaign last spring to eradicate swine flu by killing all the pigs — once the city's champion garbage consumers — misidentified the animals shown sampling Cairo street refuse with less gusto than the pigs. They were fat-tailed sheep, not goats.

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