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Coastal erosion threatens Goa's idyllic beaches (India)

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By Lita Barretto (AFP)

PANAJI, India — India's resort state of Goa has been hit by several setbacks in the last 18 months, including high-profile crime and the knock-on effects of Islamist extremist attacks up the coast in Mumbai.

But with each holiday season, a greater threat to the tourist trade emerges -- coastal erosion that is leading to fears that some of the former Portuguese colony's famous white sandy beaches could disappear for good.

The Goa assembly heard last month that more than 10 percent of the 105-kilometre (65-mile) coastline was falling into the sea, including the beach next to the state governor's official Raj Bhavan residency.

"A total of 21 stretches are affected. They cover 11.22 kilometres of coastal area," Goa's minister for water resources Filipe Neri Rodrigues told the state parliament.

Two major stretches of beach -- Colva, in south Goa, and Coco Beach, in the north -- are being reinforced with flexible barriers called "geotubes" which stop land being undercut by erosion, Rodrigues said.

Other beaches where work is required include Calangute, Baga, Sinquerim, Candolim and Palolem, which attract many of the 2.4 million tourists from India and abroad who flock to Goa every year.

"The sea erosion over the years has intensified to a very large extent, resulting in a very huge threat not only to the coastline but also to human lives," Rodrigues' department said on its website.

For Goa's many shoreline tourist bars, the situation could wreck already insecure livelihoods.

Last tourist season, business dipped sharply after the widely-publicised rape and unsolved death of a 15-year-old British girl in February 2008.

The investigation into the death of Scarlett Keeling, whose battered body was found on a beach, exposed the dark underbelly of traditionally laid-back Goa and led to a police crackdown on drink and drug-fuelled excess.

Many tourists also stayed away after militants killed 166 people in Mumbai in November last year, while restrictions were placed on Goa's annual Christmas and New Year beach parties on security grounds.

"If we lose the beaches to soil erosion, tourism will naturally be affected," said Cruz Cardoso, a local entrepreneur who heads the Goa Shack Owners Association.

Flooding due to coastal erosion had already affected trade at some beaches, he added.

The state tourist authority has expressed concern and said it is working with scientists to shore up beaches so they are not lost to the Arabian Sea.

"We're taking it very seriously because we understand how important beaches are to us," Lyndon Monteiro, vice-chairman of the Goa Tourism Development Corporation, told AFP.

"We're doing whatever is required to see that our beaches are protected from nature's fury... We're confident we can address this issue and people are aware. They know that we must act fast and in the right manner."

Goa's predicament is faced by many coastal areas around the world, as global warming affects sea levels, the intensity of storms and ocean currents.

Monteiro also accepted that haphazard and unauthorised development since tourism took off in Goa from the days of the hippie trail in the late 1960s and early 1970s has added to its woes.

Environmental scientists have said the destruction of mangroves and salt pans, plus sand mining and construction for tourism have exacerbated problems.

The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that coastal erosion could displace millions and many idyllic destinations, like the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, could be wiped off the tourist map.

In India, about 1,500 kilometres or 26 percent of the mainland coastline faces "serious erosion" and is "actively retreating", according to the Asian Development Bank.

The Manila-based organisation is currently providing technical assistance for a 1.2-million-dollar sustainable coastal protection and management project of shorelines in three states along India's west coast, including Goa.

(Source: <http://www.france24.com/>)

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