

Lead poisoning kills hundreds of children in Nigeria

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More than 400 children have died from the effects of lead poisoning in the northern Nigerian state of Zamfara. The deaths have occurred in a cluster of seven villages in the last six months.

The deaths came to light when the medical charity Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) was working with the Nigerian Ministry of Health to control an outbreak of meningitis in the area. According to the autumn edition of the newsletter *Dispatches*, MSF was contacted by a village chief. He told MSF, “Our children are dying. They have convulsions, they go into coma, they die.”

The newsletter described their symptoms. The children “had gastro-intestinal upsets, skin rashes, changes of mood; some were lethargic, some partially paralysed, some had become blind and deaf. The worst affected were coming into the small Ministry of Health clinic with seizures that could last for hour and would sometimes lead to coma and then often to death.”

MSF brought in an epidemiologist. From the symptoms the epidemiologist suspected heavy metal poisoning. The results on tests of blood, urine, soil and water samples confirmed this, with extremely high levels of lead found in the samples.

Lead is toxic to the human body, but particularly affects children, especially young children and foetuses. It results in stunted growth, neurological, renal and cognitive damage.

MSF has been treating the hospitalised children by using chelation drug therapy to reduce the levels of lead in their bodies by 75 percent. Once this level of detoxification has been reached many of them receive a second course of detoxification as outpatients. MSF are hopeful that their treatment will mean that most of the children recover fully, but for some the damage to their bodies will be irreversible.

There are 3,600 children in the seven affected

villages. However, according to an IRIN news report, a survey by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Zamfara Health Ministry identified 180 villages covering around 30,000 people that may be affected.

The lead poisoning is the result of the small-scale, mostly illegal gold mining that has recently mushroomed. Nigeria is sub-Sahara’s second largest economy, but is ranked 154 out of 179 countries in the 2008 Human Development Index. Zamfara state in the north of Nigeria, whose economy is dominated by agriculture, has been one of the areas affected by food crisis that has hit the west African countries along the southern belt of the Sahel region.

In Nigeria as a whole, 72 million people live on less than a dollar a day. A recent UK International Development Department report notes, “Income and gender inequality are very high and some states in northern Nigeria have among the worst maternal mortality and girls’ primary school enrolment rates in the world.”

Nigeria has many areas with commercial levels of minerals. The gold deposits in the Zamfara area are found in conjunction with the lead deposits. A report in the *Nigerian Inquirer* in July by Uche Igwe, a visiting scholar at the Africa Program at John Hopkins University, describes the impact the gold mining in Zamfara has had.

He writes that “the gold deposits in Zamfara state...have all been mined illegally. It is done by a ‘cartel’ that just shows up in these communities and begins to cart away the minerals.”

Many of the cartels are from South Asia, especially China. They recruit local people, including women and children, to extract the gold: “The environmental implications of illegal mining are quite diverse...it destroys farmland and distorts the livelihood of

agrarian communities. The trenches dug for these mining activities are abandoned after the mining is over...becom[ing] death traps and easy entry points for devastating gully erosions.”

Women make up more than 60 percent of the illegal miners and so their contact with contaminants affects the whole family.

An IRIN report notes that some gold ore is brought home and the women grind it to dust and then flush with water to extract the gold. Children will often be in the vicinity while the grinding process takes place, creating lead-loaded dust which is easily absorbed.

Terra Graphic, a US-based environmental engineering firm, was sent into the area to decontaminate it. They do this by removing the top soil, which contains the lead, taking it away and replacing it with clean soil. Their work was hampered by heavy rainfall that hit the area. A big factor has been the reluctance of some communities to accept that lead poisoning resulting from the gold mining process is the cause of the illness and deaths. Terra Graphics head, Ian von Linden, explained, “In some cases it takes two weeks to convince a community to open up.”

The major reason for this reluctance is the threat the government will ban the gold extraction, which the impoverished people have come to rely on. A Reuters report in June quoted Yakubu Ibrahim, a resident of Dareta, one of the villages affected: “This is the only way I live. If this mining is no longer possible, what will I do?”

IRIN quoted Umaru Na-Ta‘ala, a resident of Kirsu village, where 50 children have died, who explained, “The trade is profitable: it takes about two hours to extract one gram of gold, which miners can sell for US\$23. In comparison, 50 kilograms of millet, which takes four months to cultivate, sells for \$40.... We are apprehensive that disclosing the problem will make the government clamp down on our mining work.”



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