

Mounting deaths of Nigerian children from lead poisoning

By Trevor Johnson
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More than 460 children have died in the northern Nigerian state of Zamfara due to the effects of lead poisoning since 2009. Thousands of people have suffered from lead poisoning, with many facing long-term and serious medical conditions such as paralysis, deafness and brain damage.

People in many villages make their living by extracting gold using artisanal methods. The rocks that contain the gold also contain large amounts of lead compounds, which build up in the environment. Some of the contaminated soil examined in the area was found to comprise more than 10 percent lead.

Lead poisoning causes severe problems with bodily processes. It causes damage to many organs and tissues including the heart, bones, intestines and kidneys, as well as the reproductive and nervous systems. Its severe impact on the development of the nervous system makes it especially toxic to children, for whom it can cause permanent learning and behaviour disorders if it is not fatal.

Unlike many other poisons, there is no safe level of exposure to lead.

In 2009, over 400 children were found to have died in Zamfara state according to official figures, but the government was slow to act in tackling the crisis. Four years later, the tragedy continues.

Lead compounds are still in the soil of several villages, and children are still dying as a result of lead poisoning. Although the scale of the problem has been reduced, children are growing up with the chronic effects of lead poisoning in their bodies.

External help was given to seven Zamfara villages before the “International Congress on Lead Poisoning” held in May 2012, but others have yet to be treated. Although it is possible to provide medical help to individuals to reduce the amount of lead in their bodies,

the effect of this is minimal unless lead levels in their environment are reduced.

Most of the help provided to those affected has been provided by the charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, Doctors without Borders). More than 3,000 children have been treated by the organisation. In May 2012, the Nigerian federal government met with concerned organizations, agreeing to provide N850 million naira (\$3 million) to begin removing the lead from the villages.

This money for “remediation” (removal of poisons) was repeatedly delayed by the Nigerian government. Facing mounting pressure after years of inaction, the government finally began to release funds in late January of this year.

In April, MSF Project Manager Malam Zakariya Mawattia reported that 100 children had been affected by lead poisoning complications in the Anka and Bukkuyum Local Government Areas in Zamfara in the previous three months. “MSF is very happy to have finally—after three years—begun medical treatment in Bagega,” the most acutely affected area in Zamfara, a statement said. But thousands of children remain at risk, said MSF, because remediation remains unfinished in some area, and the work will need to stop when the rains become too heavy.

“As it is, MSF is afraid that when it finally disengages from the country, there is nobody on ground to manage the lead poisoning disease,” Mawattia said.

MSF stated it is ready to offer its services and expertise to government officials so that they are able to handle cases of lead poisoning.

The director of the Artisanal and Small Scale Mining, Ministry of Mines and Steel Development and Chairman of Safer Mining Projects, Obiorah Azubuike, claimed that a safer mining programme will bring in

wet milling machines to be installed in three centres in Zamfara. “They have already been ordered for as they cannot be procured within Nigeria and should arrive about May,” he said.

He did not explain why it has taken many years for the government to order the machines after being made aware of the devastating effect on the local population. His statement referred to artisanal gold mining as “illegal.” This labelling of small-scale mining shows the government’s haughty indifference to the lives of the people they claim to represent. In a country where 70.8 percent of the population live on less than \$1 a day and 92.4 percent on less than \$2 a day, a well-paid government official condemns those who save their families from poverty and malnutrition by risking their lives mining for gold.

Within two hours, miners can extract as much wealth as they would make from months of work growing millet.

Lead poisoning is not confined to oppressed countries like Nigeria—nor to mines based on artisanal methods of work. In the South Australian town of Port Pirie, it is estimated that more than 3,000 children were subject to lead poisoning in the years 2002 to 2012 due to the effects of the lead smelting plant located close to densely populated areas. Experts stated only last month that children in the town continue to suffer lead poisoning as a result of the plant’s operations. Professor Chris Winder, a professor of toxicology and occupational health and safety at the Australian Catholic University, said, “Port Pirie remains a heavily contaminated city from over 120 years of emissions from its lead smelter.” He added lead emissions from the smelter “fall on all surfaces in the town and the exposure will continue as long as the smelter regards pollution of the environment and the local community as acceptable practice.”

An opinion piece in *New Scientist*, “The West’s toxic hypocrisy over lead paint,” describes the way that companies increase their profit margins by 1 or 2 percent by using lead additives that are cheaper than lead-free alternatives. The article states that the companies involved, large and small, insist that they will continue to do so unless the practice is made illegal.

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