

Hundreds dead, thousands at risk from Nigerian lead pollution, UN team reports



UN experts take water samples for testing, from a Nigerian village hit by lead poisoning in Zamfara state

5 October 2010 – The deadly lead pollution crisis in the northern Nigerian state of Zamfara due to backyard gold digging is far from over, with hundreds of lives already lost and thousands of people at risk, a United Nations investigative team warned today.

“Rapid and coordinated intervention is imperative,” the five-member team from the UN Environment Programme (**UNEP**) and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (**OCHA**) said after collecting and analyzing dozens of soil and water samples from five villages.

Lead poisoning, while treatable to some degree, does irreparable damage to young children’s neurological systems, including reduced IQ, behavioural disorders and loss of control of muscles. It threatens the unborn since it passes directly through the placenta, leading to stillbirths and birth defects and, in breastfeeding, passes freely to babies through mothers’ milk.

A spike in lead-related illnesses and deaths emerged at the start of this year in two districts of Zamfara, due to attempts by locals to extract gold from lead-contaminated soils in and around their houses and compounds, and the team said most illness and deaths go unreported.

It is likely that many children have not been brought to medical clinics because the rainy season has impeded access from villages. Also, mothers who typically have up to five or 10 children cannot leave family behind, and crucial extended care facilities are lacking for children who come from polluted villages that must be cleaned before it is safe to return. So far, only two villages have been cleaned.

The team reported that polluted water is less of a concern than soil, and even possibly food such as meat and crops, and called for urgent further study, adding that the lead seems to come from the external sources of processing rather than naturally occurring in wells. It did not call for banning mining but for safer practices, such as setting up cooperatives to enable ore to be stored and processed safely outside villages rather than within family compounds.

It focused on the quality of drinking water for both humans and cattle, and found that public wells often do not meet UN World Health Organization (**WHO**) or national standards for lead limits and ponds are often polluted, while soil is highly polluted with lead. In addition, there are often high concentrations of mercury in the air.

At one former mine processing site in the village of Bagega, with some 8,000 inhabitants, air mercury levels of 5,000 nanogrammes per cubic metre were registered, a hundred times the maximum recommended level of 50. Mercury, which is used in the gold extraction processes, affects the nervous and digestive systems when inhaled.

A final report will be available by mid- to late-October, feeding into a larger process to address this crisis involving a variety of actors, including state and federal authorities, WHO, the UN Children's Fund (**UNICEF**) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have launched a major effort to remove lead- and mercury-contaminated soil and water from the villages.

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