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ENVIRONMENT-DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Hell in 'God's Paradise'

By Diógenes Pina * Special to IPS



BAJOS DE HAINA, Dominican Republic, Jan 26 (IPS) - The trees are finally green again in Paraíso de Dios since a car battery recycling plant, which produced "a kind of foggy mist, like when it rains," was relocated. But years later, children continue to be born with high levels of lead in their blood.

Paraíso de Dios (God's Paradise), a neighbourhood in the town of Bajos de Haina, 20 km west of the capital of the Dominican Republic, was included on the New York-based Blacksmith Institute's list of the world's 10 most polluted places, released in October 2006.

The culprit was Metaloxa, a battery recycling smelter that operated for 20 years in the area without complying with any environmental standards or controls. Studies have found that local residents in the area where the plant used to operate have extremely high blood lead levels, and many have suffered irreversible damages to their health.

Nearly seven years after the plant was moved elsewhere, lab tests show that many children continue to be born with high lead levels, reported a study last year by the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo (UASD) Institute of Chemistry.

One-year-old Rubí Romero has a lead level of 20 micrograms per decilitre (mcg/dl) of blood, twice the acceptable limit of 10 mcg/dl set by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Yean Carlos Cuevas, of the same age, has a level of 12 mcg/dl, while 10-year-old Diegory Pérez and Nicol García have levels of 26 mcg/dl and 23 mcg/dl, respectively.

"The contamination remains, because the plant dug pits in the area without taking the necessary precautions," explains Conrado de Depratt, head of research at the UASD Institute of Chemistry.

>From the hill where the smelter was located, rainwater washes lead oxide down to the homes below and into the Haina River, which borders the neighbourhood, says de Depratt.

The factory's waste products "should have gone into lined pits to avoid pollution through leakage," he tells IPS. And "until steps are taken to redress this situation, the damages will continue."

The town of Bajos de Haina has a population of 90,000, and 32 percent of local households are below the poverty line, according to a government report on poverty in the Dominican Republic carried out in 2005.

Around 110 companies, including the country's only oil refinery, operate in Bajos de Haina, making it a major industrial hub. It is also the country's main seaport.

In customs duties alone, the port took in 63.3 million dollars between January and June 2006, amounting to over half of the total revenue collected nationwide by the customs office.

Metaloxa pulled out of Paraíso de Dios in 1999, as a result of pressure by local residents, who forced the Public Health Ministry to take action. The struggle to get the plant moved had dragged on for nearly a decade.

But while the local community hoped the pollution would disappear once the plant was relocated, that did not happen.

"Our concern is that children have been born with high levels of lead in the blood after it closed down," says community activist Sandra Castillo.

There have also been cases of birth defects and deformities. In Paraíso de Dios, IPS was shown a 12-year-old girl and a nine-year-old boy who were born with their feet facing backwards.

Children play on the 5,000-square metre grounds of the old recycling plant, despite the lead pollution in the soil and the ruins of the factory, which is not fenced in.

Castillo gazes wearily at the abandoned lot where the plant used to operate, as if remembering the struggle in which she represented the neighbourhood since the early 1990s.

The factory was closed down by the authorities on Dec. 30, 1999. A few months later, the owners reopened it in the town's industrial zone, where it was finally closed in October 2000.

Metaloxa "left because of the pressure from the people," says the activist, who appears to be in her mid-thirties. "But the rage is still alive."

She, for one, has not forgotten a thing, which she demonstrates by reciting from memory a list of names of children who have suffered health damages, as if they were her own sons and daughters: "Rubí, Yean Carlos, Diegory, Nicol, Argelia, Kirsia"



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The Nutrition for Life Programme, which was launched here in 2000, sponsored by the U.S. foundation Friends of Lead-Free Children, the Inter-American Development Bank, and local business associations, delivers nutritional supplements to expectant mothers and children.

The supplements, which contain calcium, magnesium, zinc, vitamins A, B12, C and D, iron and folic acid, help prevent lead from passing from mother to unborn child, and help prevent lead poisoning in young children.

The supplements have been delivered religiously since the programme got underway. "My children have always received them," says Silvia García, who lives in Paraíso de Dios. "But things haven't changed. They're still weak, and they get sick frequently."

Several years ago, the UASD Institute of Chemistry said the ideal solution would be to relocate the entire community, fence off the area, plant trees there, and prohibit people from entering.

"That was the proposal we made to the Ministry of Health back then, and it's still the best solution, because nothing has changed. Nothing is being done on the grounds where the recycling plant operated," says Professor de Depratt.

A study conducted last year by the Institute of Chemistry found that the grounds and surrounding areas still had high levels of lead oxide: between 344 and 464 parts per million (ppm) on the grounds themselves, and between 160 and 400 ppm on the surrounding land.

The Dominican Republic's law on the environment and natural resources was not passed until 2000 -- in other words, 21 years after the battery recycling smelter opened.

The law states that the import, manufacturing, production, management, use and storage of high-risk substances that could cause damages to human health, the environment and natural resources must be regulated by the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources.

The ministry is now studying several proposals from the Metaloxa executives for cleaning up the polluted area in Paraíso de Dios.

The first would involve scraping off the layer of soil polluted by lead oxide, which would be taken to another country for clean-up, says Juan Felipe Ditrén, director of environmental quality in the Ministry of the Environment. He did not specify which country the soil would be shipped to.

Other alternatives would be to hire environmental clean-up specialists from Brazil, or accept a proposal from Swiss experts whose interest in the case was sparked by the Blacksmith Institute's report.

But the company must participate in any clean-up process that is undertaken, because "the consequences of environmental disasters caused by negligence will be the exclusive responsibility of the people or entities who caused them, which must restore the areas or resources that have been destroyed or affected", as stated by article 76 of the law on the environment.

Clean-up projects are long-term undertakings, sometimes lasting up to 40 years, Ditrén points out.

While the authorities are studying the various options for correcting the damages, the residents of Paraíso de Dios are urgently waiting for a solution, and Castillo continues to live next door to the old recycling plant. "This is like hell," she says. "Sometimes I think our entire struggle has been for nothing." (END/2007)

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