



Nigeria Suffers Acute Lead-Poisoning Outbreak

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UNITED NATIONS, Jul 16 (IPS) - The Nigerian government is trying to cope with an outbreak of lead poisoning which has killed over 200 people in Zamfara State since early July.

According to NGO News Africa, medical personnel supervising the treatment of victims confirmed that most of those who died were children aged five years and younger.

Doctor Alhassan Hamisu Dama, told Good Health Weekly, "I cannot say precisely, but more than 200 children died and that is why we are concentrating on treating victims of that age group."

He also urged for financial and technical assistance. "The World Health Organisation (WHO) is working with its U.N. partners to mobilise funds to deal with this unprecedented environmental emergency," Dama said.

However, WHO had no response for IPS as to when these funds were going to be mobilised or where they were explicitly coming from.

Dama told IPS, that the treatment for the children is fund demanding. He said "to place just one child on the complete dose of drug treatment requires about N480,000 [3,190 U.S. dollars]."

U. Joy Ogwu, the Permanent Representative of Nigeria, refused to comment to IPS about the outbreak and its affect on the country's citizens and environment.

However, an on-site medic told NGO News Africa, " all the victims had more than 65,000 microgrammes per decilitre lead blood levels.... The implication of this is that many of them might have suffered permanent brain damage and the damage is likely to affect their intelligence. They might show other manifestations of damage to the central nervous system."

Additionally, the Global Disease Detection (GDD) Operations Centre of the U.S. Centre for Disease Control (US CDC) is supporting the analysis of approximately 50 different types of environmental samples, including water, dust and soil.

Beginning in early June, MSF received permission from the Nigerian Food and Drug Association (FDA) to move forward with chelation therapy treatments for acute lead toxicity.

However, the number of child deaths continues to rise, according to the US CDC.

Jay Dempsey of the US CDC told IPS, "Control measures have included initiating chelation therapy when appropriate, identifying and remediating contaminated areas, developing public health messages, and controlling mining activities".

"As of 13 July, MSF had provided oral chelation therapy to 166 children in a local hospital. Most children have responded well, with convulsions resolving within one day of initiating treatment."

The Dutch arm of Doctors Without Borders has also treated contaminated villagers with drugs they have brought in, according the New York Times.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported to the Zamfara State Ministry of Health that there was an increasing incidence of childhood illness and mortality in the two Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Bukkuyum and Anka in March-April.

A response team deployed by the US CDC, including members from TerraGraphics Environmental Engineering Inc. sent by Blacksmith Institute, the national and state authorities, MSF, and the country office of WHO, investigated the matter and confirmed that there was "severe lead poisoning in children in the villages of Dareta and Yargalma."

The activity of illegal miners and the improper processing of lead- contaminated gold ore caused the high death tolls.

However, the lead-poisoning outbreak has proven to be significantly more severe.

To date, the US CDC reports that there have been documented lead- poisoning related deaths in at least six villages in Zamfara since the outbreak in March-April.

Within recent months, medical and environmental measures to eradicate the poisoning have been taking place in Nigeria.

The Nigerian Ministry of Environment is working to develop public health interventions, and plans to hire 70 workers per village for remediation, which might include installing cement floors to seal out any remaining contamination.

Investigations confirm that the environmental contamination and timing of the outbreak are related to the recent increase in illegal mining activities and the greater involvement of women and children in processing lead contaminated gold ore in their homes, there still is no plan for the residents to evacuate the area, according to BBC News.

According to NGO News Africa, "high cost of treatment coupled with shortage of hospital staff, reluctance by parents in the affected communities to surrender their children for treatment and inaccessibility of some affected villages continue to be major factors militating against the response drive spearheaded by the Zamfara State government."

(END/2010)