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A quest for gold leaves more than 160 children dead in Nigeria

By Charissa Sparks

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23 July 2010 [MediaGlobal]: Illegal mining in several remote villages in Nigeria's Zamfara state continues to expose workers to large quantities of lead. This has started an outbreak of lead poisoning, which, since last March, has taken the lives of more than 160 children under five years of age.

Low body weight and early brain development are two reasons why children under five are at greater risk for lead poisoning. However, children are not the only ones suffering. Lead is one of the most potent neurotoxins known to humans. When inhaled, lead directly attacks the central nervous system causing headaches, vomiting, convulsions, kidney failure, brain damage, behavior and learning problems, and, often death.

Gautam Chatterjee, Country Manager of Medecins Sans Frontieres' Nigeria Mission, told **MediaGlobal**, "It is estimated that the entire populations of seven contaminated villages may be affected. Approximately 10,000 individuals, 2,000 of who are children under five, are in acute danger of death or severe illness."

Lead poisoning occurs when people try to extract gold from lead-containing ore. There are generally three main steps to the mining process: crushing ore, slicing it, and drying it to retrieve gold. It is the crushing procedure that exposes workers to large amounts of lead. Additionally, residual dust is carried throughout the villages, embedding itself into the soil and thus contaminating food and water in villages. Furthermore, the drying process is often done at home, causing dust to enter into huts and unknowingly exposing humans to dangerous amounts of lead.

Many of the people in these villages have turned to gold mining because it produces a higher profit than farming. Chatterjee explained, "Gold processing activity has been the main source of livelihood for many people in the villages." However, it was being done on a smaller scale because of the lack of grinding machines. "As of late there has been some investment by financiers to buy more grinding machines, thereby increasing production capacity."

The Zamfara Ministry of Health has enlisted TerraGraphics/Blacksmith Foundation, an American clean up organization, to begin working in local communities. Local villagers used picks and shovels to clear away the contaminated soil from the floors of the housing compounds. The soil is placed in plastic bags and buried far from the village. Today, two villages have been successfully decontaminated. "But this is only the beginning," Chatterjee said. "At least five other villages also need to be cleaned up. If these villages are not remediated, there is a high risk of children also dying in these villages."

Medecins Sans Frontieres currently provides an oral drug as treatment for the most vulnerable patients. The drug is currently available to patients from two of the affected villages. The treatment takes 28 days to completely clear the lead from the blood; extreme cases often require two or more rounds. To date, more than 200 children and breast feeding mothers have been treated. Breast feeding mothers are considered among the most vulnerable because lead is transmitted to children through milk. However, in order for the treatment to be effective in the long term, the patients must be able to return home to a village free of contamination.

The World Health Organization has applied for special emergency funding in order to efficiently cleanup villages and properly care for the infected. The five villages targeted for cleanup are: Tungar-dadj, Abare,



The quest for gold comes at a high cost for Nigerian families. (Photo Credit: Mashada)

Duza, Sunke, and Tungar-guru. However, obtaining the funds has proved to be a difficult task. Chatterjee points out, "The remediation of these villages has not occurred due to lack of immediate availability of funds. The problem is that by the time funds come through and are distributed to implementing agencies—which could still be several more weeks—the children in these other five villages may not be treated on time to prevent neurological damage, or even death."

What began as a search for economic gain has now become a race against time to save the lives of Nigeria's children. Successful decontamination of two villages has proved that remediation of all five villages is achievable, provided the proper funding is made available.

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