

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, May. 17, 2011

Paradise remade: Dominican Republic lead polluter goes green

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Jorge Cruz / For the Herald

The health of the families who live in "God's Paradise" neighborhood in Haina, Dominican Republic has improved significantly after many children suffered lead poisoning. The lot that once housed a battery smelter that polluted the area is now a grassy park.

Just five years ago, this low-income industrial town just west of the capital was considered one of the "most polluted places in the world."

Poisoned by toxic levels of lead in their blood, kids erupted in seizures. Most of them sported blank stares, which conveyed that they never fully appreciated the neurological consequences of all those afternoons spent playing with unearthed remnants of a battery recycling plant.

"I think he's better," Yolandi Alcantara said of her son Johan Luciano, 18. "He used to get epilepsy."

The lot where Johan and other neighborhood boys spent years playing in poisoned dirt is now a grass-covered park. It's decorated with cobblestone and surrounded by a painted mural of

the neighborhood activists who spent more than 15 years fighting their government and local battery plant to clean up the area.

God's Paradise, a collection of spontaneous settlements in a city called Haina, is unspoiled now. Children's lead blood levels are at safe levels. And to the surprise of everyone involved, the company blamed for contaminating their bodies and land is now a leader in the green recycling movement. A place once known for being one of the planet's most contaminated neighborhoods is now being held up as an example of what can happen when a neighborhood, environmentalists, the international community, academics, the business sector and government work together.

"I'm green now," said Jose Antonio Rodriguez, president of Meteoro, the Dominican Republic's largest battery recycler. "What are they going to say about me now?"

They started saying bad things in the 1980s, when Rodriguez's family operated a battery plant in the area — long before many of the illegal houses that eventually surrounded his smelter even existed. Like many of the back-alley battery plants that still exist in Santo Domingo, Metaloxa

routinely bought used batteries, dumped the acid and sold the remains for profit.

When activists visited in the early 1990s, they found a 30-foot high pile of batteries. Lead fumes wafted in the air.

The levels of lead in the children's blood were 30 times the accepted average; the soil, 1,000 times.

"We struggled for 18 years," said Sandra Castillo, the activist whose face is now on the mural. "I called and called and nobody listened."

Eventually, the New York-based Friends of Lead Free Children and the environmental group Blacksmith Institute intervened. When Blacksmith placed Haina third on its 2006 list of the Top 10 most polluted places on the planet, the negative publicity got the Dominican government's attention.

There were lawsuits and headlines and news conferences. Rodriguez says it was all a dirty campaign by battery business rivals and organizations that wanted lucrative cleanup contracts.

He did remediate the site, and stresses that it was not his fault that locals dug up the waste to sell on the black market.

"I had 34 people working for 10 or 12 years, and never once was someone poisoned. We sealed it and buried it, and now you're going to tell me children were poisoned?" he said. "Anybody who caught a cold, got diarrhea or had a sore throat within two miles of there said it was because of the plant. The truth doesn't sell, but failure and black publicity do."

The InterAmerican Development Bank, the Dominican Ministry of Environment and Blacksmith eventually cleaned up the site. Rodriguez said he paid the tab, which Blacksmith denies. Cleanup cost nearly \$500,000.

Richard Fuller, president of the Blacksmith Institute, said all of the children in Haina now have safe — and continuously dropping — lead levels.

"I'm happy he built a good facility, and that he won't poison the community anymore, but I would never leave my children near this man," Fuller said. "He didn't care at all about the local community or the contaminated children. He's on the wrong side. We fixed it, but we had to fight and scratch."

The company, he said, changed names and legal entities to dodge responsibility.

What nobody denies is that Rodriguez, still smarting over the Haina affair, invested about \$8 million on betting green. Last month, he opened Hispaniola's first environmentally friendly battery recycling plant. He hopes to put all his black-market competitors out of business.

His plant uses a novel technology to remove toxins and turn them into inert materials, which can be used for construction. In a country where most people use batteries to run generators that replace spotty electrical service, Rodriguez plans to move about 9,500 batteries a day.

“We are solving an environmental problem. We’re betting on the future,” he said. “We are converting the bad guys into battery exporters by betting on green technology.”

It’s a trend spreading throughout the region, where toxic battery smelters were once common. The movement began a decade ago with a United Nations treaty.

Lead is the second most-popular metal. More than two million tons is produced each year, most of which winds up in lead-acid batteries.

Mined for at least 8,000 years, lead was one of the first health and safety issues in the workplace, according to the U.N.

In developing countries like the Dominican Republic, used batteries are busted open manually. Chronic poisoning accumulates in the bones and causes fatigue, headache, aching bones and muscles, forgetfulness, loss of appetite and sleep. But the major damage is seen in children, who suffer irreversible neurological damage.

“People in the developing world were operating in a way that wasn’t to the best standards,” said Brian Wilson, program manager of the International Lead Management Center, an organization funded by the lead industry. “It’s easy to shut down the smelter and put people out of work. In this case, we worked with the company and the government.”

And while the families in the area are happy the site was cleaned up, and are pleased to have a grassy lot in its place, they say not enough was done to help the children. The school’s principal said that of the 338 children in the school, there are 55 whose lead poisoning left them with learning disabilities. The most severely affected kids like Johan were permanently damaged, and never received any special education or services.

“The Center for Lead Free Children sends vitamins for the kids,” said Fausto de Leon, the neighborhood association president. “On the human side, nobody ever really did anything.”

Environment Minister David Fernandez Mirabal is nonetheless proud of what he accomplished. He’s so pleased with the new park that he does not let the children play on it, because he doesn’t want the grass to get trampled.

“The society that turns its back on its waste,” Fernandez said, “will end up in waste.”

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