

INTERVIEW-Toxic hotspots affect 600 mln in developing world

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* Non-profit body raising \$500 mln for industrial waste fund

* 600 mln people affected by toxic hotspots

* Africa ranks as the worst, with China second

By David Dolan

NUSA DUA, Indonesia, May 5 (Reuters) - As many as 600 million people will die early from exposure to industrial waste, most of them in the developing world, the head of a non-profit group warned on Tuesday.

Tanneries, mines and car battery recycling sites are often "toxic hotspots" in developing countries, causing cancer, retardation in children and early death, Richard Fuller, president of the Blacksmith Institute, said in an interview.

New York-based Blacksmith works with communities around the world to clean up such sites, focusing on those that threaten human health. The organisation aims to raise \$500 million for its Health and Pollution Fund, which Fuller said could eradicate toxic hotspots in a few decades.

"This is a finite problem. There are just thousands, not tens of thousands, of toxic hotspots around the world," he said.

"It's something that we can solve in our lifetimes."

Fuller spoke to Reuters on the sidelines of the Asian Development Bank's annual meeting held on the island of Bali in Indonesia.

Blacksmith, which has so far completed more than 50 such clean-up projects since 1999, has been working with the ADB and the World Bank to establish its fund.

Concern about polluted places is growing as the world's population swells and people in developing countries such as China and India buy more goods like cars and electronics.

Most of the companies responsible for the industrial waste are not large multinationals, but often smaller, local firms, Fuller said.

Multinationals are more sensitive to negative publicity associated with industrial waste and usually have ample resources to clean up for themselves, he said.

To publicise the issue, Blacksmith now releases an annual listing of the world's worst pollution problems and most polluted places [www.worstpolluted.org].

Africa tops the list for the most polluted region, followed by China.

Blacksmith has led a \$200,000 clean-up of a battery site in Haina in the Dominican Republic, in which much of the underlying soil was 35 percent lead, a pollutant that leads to severe learning disabilities in children.

Cleanup costs can range from \$10 million for sites that involve polluted rivers, to \$20,000 for cleaning up rusty containers of toxic chemicals that face the risk of exploding.

While the global financial crisis has made it tougher to raise funds, Fuller said he was undeterred in his mission.

"This is half a billion people who are being poisoned," he said. "That's not a tolerable situation." (Editing by Sugita Katyal)



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