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- Devastated by oil exploration, neglected by govt

BY IKENNA EMEWU

Saturday, July 17, 2010

While many people enjoy the comfort of their homes and company of family and friends, some others rather decide to step out to distant and strange places to do what many would not. Most times, their quest to live their desire involves hazards to their own lives. That is exactly the situation in the deserts of Zamfara State where some people – Nigerians and foreigners have converged to save lives.

Disaster struck in the state in the remote villages where the people live by mining for gold their local way. The mining that has been on for time immemorial as the locals say overflowed with fatality as over 365 persons were later found to have high dosage of lead poison in their system. And 165 died of it among who were about 111 children. Inside sources, however, say that the deaths are far in excess of 200 children in those affected villages.

The uproar is that the entire place is poisoned and toxic. That involves the water, air, land, plants and animals. It also means that people live in danger in these places thereby making the whole villages unsafe for human beings and livestock.

But that was not enough deterrent for some persons who decided to play the hero to be there and save other lives even if theirs are on the line. They have come from far and near and are helping in one field or the other, toiling day and night indoors and outside the home to achieve an aim of saving lives.



- Three youths in toxic earth pit
- Photo: The Sun Publishing

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In the first place, the entire desert environment of Zamfara in the hinterlands where modern facilities for good living are not available is inclement. There is no electricity, good water, air conditioner, good and familiar food or faces. The people being attended to are ill and not smiling at the rescue workers as to give them some joy. The environment has got contaminants all around. Yet, all these odds seem to ginger the heroes and heroines to do more and give their best.

Among these people are medical workers from the prominent Medicine Sans Frontiers (MSF) or doctors without borders. It is an international NGO with nativity in France that goes to places of need and hazards to assist victims.

Through the efforts of MSF, the killer lead poison was detected in the villages of Zamfara, and by their efforts the cause of deaths was tracked. They did not stop at the detection but further sent their team of aid workers to relocate to Bukkuyum hospital to provide care to 70 children who are all patients. The number has not overwhelmed the team as they work round the clock to save lives.

One of them is Dr. Jane McKenzie, who by her name should be US citizen. They have not cowered from the harsh desert high temperature in the day and the chilling cold nights, rather they feel happy and good living their desire of living for others. To them what matters is not their safety or comfort but those of others in need. Indeed, McKenzie happily said they are satisfied with the work they are doing in Zamfara because all the children under their care are responding to treatment.

In Daret, one of the affected villages in Anka Council of the state is another set of heroes. About four of them are foreigners. They all left New York, USA some few months ago for Senegal where they were needed for an environmental rescue service. While working there, these members of the Blacksmiths Institute that specialize in environmental hazards control got a call to proceed to Nigeria for something pressing. They left immediately and landed in Zamfara right in the heart of the desert and worst of all, they are quartered in the middle of a desert where lives are unsafe due to lead poisoning.

While the natives find their way out to stay out of the harm, they rather volunteer to stay in the trouble to solve it. They are Ian Von-Lindern, an environmental engineer and head of the team. The rest are Simba, a Kenyan resident in the USA, Daniel, a US citizen and a lady both of who should be in the 20s. The white young lady, whose mates are in the cities enjoying some pleasure, was seen relating with the natives as if she had

known them from birth and family, and like she had lived there all her life.

They are busy digging up contaminated soil from Dareta and will proceed to other villages like Abare, Tunga Daji and Yargalma. As they dig, they bag the earth, take them to a ditch they made for the burial and will also procure clean and safe soil from other places and fill the entire surface before the children in hospital would be discharged.

Another set are Nigerians from Zamfara including the director in the state Ministry of Environment who is there from morning to evening together with the state governor's aide on special works. Certainly he is doing a special work according to his designation and that involves risk to lives. They have not worried so much on how safe their involvement would be, but instead on how to achieve their aim and make the places habitable and safe once again.

Theirs is great sacrifice for other people's comfort and without them and their invaluable contributions and toils, the halting of the rampaging heavy metal killer in Zamfara would have been impossible. Saturday Sun overheard Simba, the Kenyan telling somebody in a discussion that "people find it very hard to believe that we don't get paid for this work we do." What a way to be selfless and loving?

These people all deserve garlands and kudos for what they have decided to do for others in these danger zones. They are the heroes in the desert on whose shoulders the safety of the endangered natives rest.

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