

# NEWSINDEPTH

## How 9 gold miners died in Zamfara



■ A gold mine pit in Bagega village.

From Shehu Umar, Gusau

Barely a year after four illegal miners were buried in Bagega village, Anka local government, another tragedy struck again, Tuesday, in Dogon Daji village of Ruwan Dorawa district, Maru local government area of Zamfara State when nine miners were trapped in collapsed gold mine.

The incident happened around 5 am when the miners were busy digging up gold at one of the mining sites, in the outskirts of the village.

A witness Shafi'u Abdullahi told *Daily Trust* that he and some Muslim faithful were observing the Subhi prayer in a mosque when people rushed from the mines shouting for help. "We all rushed to the site and found out that an underground tunnel had collapsed and buried people alive," he said.

"We used hoes, shovels and other available implements to excavate the earth and rescue the trapped miners, but we were able to remove only one person who was rushed to the hospital in Maru," Abdullahi said.

*Daily Trust* was also gathered that it took the rescuers close to nine hours to recover the bodies of the nine miners from the collapsed tunnel. They were buried several meters beneath the earth crust.

Another witness Lawal Abubakar said: "When we brought them out around 2pm, nine of them were already dead except one Mallam Hussaini Maikifi who was still alive; we rushed him to the hospital.

"The tunnel showed sign of possible collapse even before the incident happened and the miners did not heed repeated warnings to avoid the site," Abubakar said, pointing out that it is a big money spinner.

In fact there are about five illegal mining sites around the area. They have all been vacated following the incident.

Local sources disclosed that two miners had made N2.3M in one of the mining pits in the area a day before the tragedy struck and that the business has become a big means to jobless villagers.

"We won't stop mining despite the dangers unless government provides alternative jobs because we are eking out a living from the business," Isah Ibrahim told *Daily Trust*.

State Police Public Relations Officer DSP Hassan Usman Talba while confirming the incident said that the law banning all forms of illegal mining was still in force and that anybody caught would face the full wrath of the law.

Recent soil therapy conducted by a team comprising experts from National Centre for Disease Control and the state environmental sanitation agency has exposed several communities in Gusau and environs as having very large concentration of lead.

About four communities of Unguwar Danbaba, Samaru and Danmaikyau cotton ginneries are said to have been confirmed as contaminated areas and seven children between the ages of one and five have been confirmed infected.

In August this year, the Emir of Gusau Alhaji Muhammad Kabir Danbaba raised alarm about the recent discovery of devastating concentration of lead in his domain.

Lead poisoning started when people in the poverty stricken communities resorted to illegal mining of gold and other mineral resources to make ends meet.

Many locally devised mineral processing plants were built by the villagers who are ignorant of the danger associated with the activity. They work on the mines unprotected, and the heavy presence of lead in the mined mineral affected especially women and children.

A very large number of women



■ Soil remediation exercise in Bagega village.

and children have been affected resulting in the death of about 1000 children in the last two years. Hundreds of others have been deformed one way or the other.

Health experts have also warned that lead poisoning could cause infertility and miscarriage in pregnant women.

Mallama Amina, a house wife who lost her 7 year old child, Sani, following a very large concentration of lead in his blood recounted her sorrow to *Daily Trust*.

"He was our only child in the family and we lost him. I'm pleading with the government to come to our aid," she said as she wept.

This menace drew the attention of government and nongovernmental organizations such as UNICEF, WHO and Medicines Sans Frontiers etc. These organizations have partnered with the state and federal governments on the scourge by sending experts to provide medical aid and sensitize the affected communities on how to take preventive measures against lead poisoning.

Government on its part has embarked on massive sensitization and enlightenment campaigns

against the danger of lead poisoning, sometimes cracking down on illegal miners.

Residents at Bagega village said that poverty plays a major role in this problem. They confirmed that youths, mostly in their early twenties, are digging underground tunnels in search of gold.

One illegal miner, Garba Ali, told our reporter that he would never abandon mining until he got what he needs to live a life with less stress.

"Any attempt to stop people from mining means that government will create security problem because it provides job to thousands of jobless youths," he said.

Investigation revealed that dealers from neighbouring countries have flooded the mining sites. Alhaji Ibrahim Garba is one of them and told *Daily Trust* that he buys every 1gram of gold at the rate of N6,000.

"The miners don't need to go to Gusau to sell the gold. As soon as they bring their consignment, we weigh it and then pay them. An average miner makes about 50 thousand a day," he said.

Four gold miners were last year

buried alive in an underground tunnel they dug. Even though the miners have deserted the site where that particular incident happened, many other sites still flourish in parts of the state.

The state governor Alhaji Abdulaziz Yari said the government would put an end to the illegal mining activities. A remediation project was flagged off recently in Bagega village and this is one of the drastic action that was taken to end the calamity that threatens to wipe away an entire generation.

The state government also revealed that at least N2.6bn is needed to check lead poisoning through the remediation projects already started in the affected communities of Bagega, Dareta, Yargalma and so on.

Presently the contaminated soils in these communities are being evacuated and international communities have since developed interest in assisting through the provision of funds and experts.

For now, the illegal miners look determined to forge ahead despite the associated dangers until problems of unemployment, poverty etc are properly addressed.



■ Mineral being processed locally.