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# Zamfara gold rush and lead poisoning threat

13/05/2012 00:00:00 [Maram Mazen](#)

A gold rush in northern Nigeria risks exposing tens of thousands of children to lead poisoning in what may already be the worst such crisis in history, Medecins Sans Frontieres said.

Residents of the northern Zamfara state started artisanal gold-mining in lead-rich ore around 2009 as the price of gold increased. When miners return to their villages, or grind ore near their homes, they spread lead-rich dust into households and the ground on which children crawl, resulting in them eating the lead as they have more hand-to-mouth activity than adults, the Geneva-based aid group said.

“We’re looking at the possibility of eventually more of the lead working its way into the aquifers, into the wells, into the water systems,” Ivan Gayton, a country director for MSF, told reporters yesterday in Abuja, the capital. “We haven’t even gotten there yet. Right now, we’re just looking at the effects of one or two years’ worth of dust.”

The outbreak has led to the deaths of 460 children, while 4,000 have been contaminated, he said. MSF has treated 2,500, some of whom will need as many as 20 years of follow-up therapy. Another 1,500 children in the village of Bagega haven’t been treated because the government hasn’t cleaned up the area, making treatment futile, he said. In seven villages where a clean-up has been carried out, recontamination has occurred and is now accelerating, he said.

Mohammed Kabir Janyau, the commissioner of Zamfara state’s Health Ministry, said by phone from Abuja today that the local authority is “trying to enlighten people to understand the culture of safe mining practice” as well as providing miners with safety equipment such as masks, gloves and respirators. An official who answered the phone at the Federal Mining Ministry declined to comment and said the minister wasn’t immediately available to comment.

Gayton spoke at a two-day meeting of Nigeria’s ministries of health, environment and mining on the crisis. The federal government should help the miners find a safer way to extract the gold while cleaning the lead from households and villages to prevent further contamination, he said.

“We were hoping at this conference we would hear a real concrete response, that there would be a time-line and a real commitment of resources,” Jane Cohen, an environmental health researcher with New York-based Human Rights Watch, said today in Abuja.

The lack of high-level government participation suggests that may not be the case, she said. “The role that the federal government can play is clear right now, and by not playing that they are preventing the situation from being resolved.”

“The decision makers aren’t here today,” Gayton said at the closing session of the conference. “So those people who can actually make the decisions to begin these programs, sent representatives but they aren’t here to announce these decisions.”

The government announced in November that it would fund a clean-up with 850 million naira (\$5.4 million). That would “go a long way” to resolving the issue, though authorities have yet to display “the political will to get that money released,” Gayton said. MSF is spending \$5 million of its own money a year to treat the children, and lacks the resources to provide more treatment if the crisis worsens, he said.

“Even if the ministers were here themselves, they wouldn’t have been able to say when it’s going to be released,” Abdulsalami Nasidi, a project director for Nigeria Center for Disease Control, who was representing the health minister at the conference, said at the closing session when asked when the funds would be provided. “We pledge to follow up.”

Long-term consequences for the children who have been treated include mental deficiency, loss of IQ, damaged organs and developmental difficulties, Gayton said. “Even those children who we’ve saved are likely to be in rough shape, and probably for the rest of their lives.”

Located in the poverty-stricken north of Nigeria, 71 percent of Zamfara’s population lives on less than \$1 a day, compared with the national average of 61 percent. Children there have been found with levels of lead that are dozens of times higher than the internationally accepted threshold, Gayton said.

“It’s accurate to say that this is one of the worst, if not the worst, lead-poisoning crises ever,” he said. He predicts it may get worse, driven by a near-quadrupling of gold prices in the last seven years, to about \$1,600 an ounce.

“With the price of gold anywhere near where it is right now, it’s going to continue expanding,” he said of the artisanal mining. “People will find the limits of these gold deposits, no matter how far they go.”

Courtesy: Bloomberg

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