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Lead poisoning kills 400 more Nigerian children

(Reuters) - Lead poisoning linked with illegal gold mining has killed a further 400 children in northern Nigeria since November, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) said on Monday.

The latest figures suggest the death toll from the crisis in the northern state of Zamfara is rising after the United Nations said lead poisoning in the region had killed at least 400 children between March and October last year.

Such is the economic draw of illegal gold mining that impoverished farmers dig up rocks by hand in open mines, but the ore being unearthed around their villages contains high concentrations of lead, contaminating the air, soil and water.

Excessive lead can cause irreparable damage to the nervous and reproductive systems and the kidneys. It is especially harmful to young children and pregnant women who pass the metal on to fetuses or to babies via breastfeeding.

"The immature body system of children exposed to contaminated soils and gold processing tools tends to rapidly absorb associated lead and in the process poisoning then leading to convulsion, paralysis and even death," NEMA Director General, Muhammad Sani-Sidi, said in a statement on Monday.

A U.N. report earlier this year, based on a joint assessment mission, said high levels of lead pollution were found in soil and mercury levels in the air were nearly 500 times the acceptable limit in some villages in Zamfara.

The report said many children under five and adults tested in the affected areas had "extremely high levels of lead in their blood" while lead limits in drinking water tested exceeded U.N. standards, in at least one case by 10 times.