



Group: Nigeria lead poisoning victims need care

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Victims of a lead poisoning epidemic that has killed hundreds of children in Nigeria's northwest are in need of long-term care, said an international aid agency.

The U.K.-based office of Doctors Without Borders said that the work it has been doing to treat the victims was only "a beginning" as it accepted the U.N.-backed Green Star Award for leadership in environmental emergencies in Bern, Switzerland on Wednesday.

Emergency Manager Lauren Cooney called for new partners to get involved at a ceremony that recognized the aid organization for treating lead poisoning patients in Zamfara state since March 2010.

Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency has estimated that about 400 people have died in northern Nigeria from lead poisoning since the epidemic broke out----most of them children. Lead poisoning is caused by the processing of gold ore in residential compounds, where people are exposed to toxic levels of lead found in the ore.

Doctors Without Borders collaborated with the Nigerian government, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the World Health Organization, UNICEF and TerraGraphics/Blacksmith Foundation who have decontaminated seven of the affected villages.

But, the organization says that one of the villages still needs to have its top soil layer removed and that the women of childbearing age and children are in need of more long-term care. Lead poisoning can damage the nervous, muscular and reproductive systems, and children are particularly at risk.

"There are limits to what we can do as an emergency aid organization," said Cooney as she called for assistance for the "vital, ongoing response to lead poisoning in northern Nigeria."

The Nigerian government has focused on raising awareness, but its efforts to stop villagers from mining has been met with resistance due to widespread poverty in the area.

"Even if the exposure is dangerous, they will tell you it is the only way they can eke out a living," said National Emergency Management Agency spokesman, Yushau Shuaib.

"A delegation last month went to some of the affected areas to talk to traditional rulers and warn their people to stop mining. Later, those who were still going to mine were arrested," Shuaib said.

Shuaib says the government is looking into alternative employment for the former miners.