

January 3, 2009

Lead for car batteries poisons an African town

By HEIDI VOGT
Associated Press Writer

First, it took the animals. Goats fell silent and refused to stand up. Chickens died in handfuls, then en masse. Street dogs disappeared.

Then it took the children. Toddlers stopped talking and their legs gave out. Women birthed stillborns. Infants withered and died. Some said the houses were cursed. Others said the families were cursed.

The mysterious illness killed 18 children in this town on the fringes of Dakar, Senegal's capital, before anyone in the outside world noticed. When they did - when the TV news aired parents' angry pleas for an investigation, when the doctors ordered more tests, when the West sent health experts - they did not find malaria, or polio or AIDS, or any of the diseases that kill the poor of Africa.

They found lead.

The dirt here is laced with lead left over from years of extracting it from old car batteries. So when the price of lead quadrupled over five years, residents started digging up the earth to get at it. The World Health Organization says the area is still severely contaminated, 10 months after a government cleanup.

The tragedy of Thiaroye Sur Mer gives a glimpse at how the globalization of a modern tool - the car battery - can wreak havoc in the developing world.

As the demand for cars has increased, especially in China and India, so has the demand for lead-acid car batteries. About 70 percent of the lead manufactured worldwide goes into car batteries, which are also used to power TVs and cell phones in some areas.

Both the manufacturing and the recycling of these batteries has moved mostly to the Third World. Between 2005 and 2006, four waves of lead poisoning involving batteries were reported in China. And in the Vietnamese village of Dong Mai, lead smelting left 500 people with chronic illnesses and 25 children with brain damage before the government shut it down three years ago, according to **San Francisco-based OK International, which works on environmental standards for battery manufacturing.**

Thiaroye Sur Mer is a town of 100,000 where yearly rains leave people wading through knee-deep water inside their cement-block houses. A train track bisects the town and daily trains speed through just a few steps from homes. The ocean used to supply a livelihood, but fishing hasn't been good the past few years. Young men have increasingly taken to trying to sneak into Europe

aboard large canoes with outboard motors.

For years, the town's blacksmiths extracted lead from car batteries and remolded it into weights for fishing nets. It's a dangerous, messy process in which workers crack open the batteries with a hatchet and pull small pieces of lead out of skin-burning acid. The work left the dirt of Thiaroye dense with small lead particles.

Then the price of lead climbed, and traders from India came and asked about the dirt. They offered to buy bits of lead by the bag for 60 cents a kilogram, says Coumba Diaw, a middle-aged mother of two.

So Diaw dug up the dirt with a shovel and carried bags of it back to her house. There, she sat outside and separated out the lead with a sifter. It took just an hour of sifting to make what she did in a day of selling vegetables at the market. She kept her two daughters nearby as she worked.

Women all over the neighborhood did the same, creating dust clouds of lead.

Then the sicknesses started. The deaths came, one after another, over the five months from October 2007 through March 2008.

At first, people thought it was malaria or tuberculosis. Doctors at the local health clinic kept seeing the same symptoms with no response to treatment and started running more tests.

That's when Demba Diaw's 4-year-old daughter died. First she got a bad fever. Then she started vomiting. Diaw, a 31-year-old teacher at an Islamic school, thought it was malaria and took her to the hospital. The next day she was dead.

"The doctors couldn't say what she died of," says Diaw. His voice rises as he talks, and he spits out the words. He shows a picture of his daughter that he carries with him, and the plastic casing of a lead battery.

Diaw started talking to other parents whose children had the same symptoms. They were spending more money each day for more lab tests but not getting any answers. So he called the local media and held a news conference to demand an investigation.

At about the same time, the hospital confirmed lead poisoning. The World Health Organization was called in.

The government ran blood tests on relatives of the dead children. Their mothers and siblings were found to have lead levels of 1,000 micrograms per liter. Just 100 micrograms per liter is enough to impair brain development in children.

A block from Diaw's house, the illness struck his niece, two-year-old Raminatou, the child Coumba Diaw carried on her back.

"It started with a fever. Her skin was hot. She would tremble and her eyes would roll back. She would drool. Her legs would splay out. She cried all the time," says Coumba Diaw. She speaks without emotion, recounting the events as if it all happened to someone else.

Diaw rushed her daughter to the hospital. Now that they knew the problem, they saved Raminatou.

The cleanup started in March, but was not extensive, residents say. On a side street in Thiaroye Sur Mer, a man points out a pile of sacks full of lead pellets that have sat against a wall for months through the rainy season. He says someone ditched the sacks there when they heard the lead was dangerous, and they were missed by the cleanup operation.

About 950 people have been continuously exposed to lead dust in the neighborhood, and many children show signs of neurological damage, according to WHO. The sifting tossed lead particles into the air where people could inhale it.

In richer countries, recycling of lead batteries is regulated. Most U.S. states require anyone who sells lead-acid batteries to collect spent ones and ship them to recycling plants licensed and regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency. Europe has similar oversight.

"It's when you get to Third World countries where you don't have regulations or attempts to control the movement of this product that you see these kind of tragedies occurring," says Maurice Desmarais, executive director of Battery Council International, a U.S.-based trade group.

Although North America and Europe continue to be the world's biggest buyers of cars, fewer and fewer car batteries are made there. Manufacturing has moved where labor is cheaper and environmental protections regulations are more lenient, or at least more leniently enforced.

"There's not a developing country where this isn't happening," says Perry Gottesfeld, of OK International.

Most in Thiaroye say they will never go back to sifting dirt for lead. But some still don't believe it is dangerous.

Mohamadou Diagne, a scrap metal trader, says he hasn't bought any lead since the poisonings became known. But he says he grew up cracking open batteries for lead, and he hasn't been poisoned. He has not had his blood tested for lead.

"My father is 75. He's never had any problems," he says.

An Indian buyer about a half-mile away from the town still has a large yard full of battery casings and sacks of lead pellets. The company used to buy some of the lead dug up in Thiaroye.

Workers there confirm that they ship the lead and batteries out of the country but won't give further details. The owner declined a number of requests for an interview.

The government has stripped the top layer of dirt from the roads with earthmovers and is paying the hospital bills of anyone sickened by the lead. That's at least 55 children to start, and likely more once the testing is finished.

The World Health Organization says there's still so much lead in the ground that the area is toxic. The government wants to relocate the entire neighborhood. But Demba Diaw says the government just wants to profit from the lead in their earth, and Coumba says this is her only home.

Like many other families, the Diaws are too poor and too rooted to move. So they will stay where the lead poisons the earth.

On the Net:

<http://www.okinternational.org/>