

Panama: More tainted medicine in 1,155 bottles

September 18 2009, By JUAN ZAMORANO , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The death toll from contaminated medicine sold three years ago in Panama could be higher than previously believed after 1,155 bottles of tested positive for a chemical commonly found in antifreeze and brake fluid, investigators said Thursday.

Authorities are trying to track down the names that appear on the bottles that tested positive for diethylene [glycol](#) to see if any of the users of the medication died, possibly raising the official count of 116 fatalities.

"At the moment, we have no knowledge of these 1,155 people," Guevara said. "We don't know if any of them died, we don't know if any were affected."

The 1,155 bottles are among 6,774 handed over to authorities after people were sickened in 2006 from poisonous cough syrup, antihistamine tablets, calamine lotion and rash ointment made at a government laboratory.

Prosecutor Dimas Guevara said test results were pending for thousands more bottles.

Relatives of the victims have long questioned the official estimates of how many people were sickened by the chemical, which was allegedly made by two Chinese companies that sold it to a Spanish firm saying it was 99.5 percent pure glycerin, a sweetener and thickening agent commonly used in drugs. The Spanish company then allegedly sold it to

a company in Panama, which in turn sold it to the government lab.

A director of the Panamanian company, Medicom, has been detained for a year pending the investigation. Another dozen people are also under investigation.

The Committee of Families for the Right to Health and Life, which represents relatives of other victims, has always said more than 1,000 people have been affected, said Gabriel Pascual, the leader of the group.

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