

Toxic liquor kills 143 in eastern India

December 15 2011, by Sailendra Sil

A batch of home-brewed liquor thought to have been laced with the highly toxic chemical methanol has killed 143 people in eastern India, an official told AFP on Thursday.

Hospitals near the impoverished district 30 kilometres (20 miles) south of West Bengal state capital Kolkata have been overwhelmed by victims, either unconscious or complaining of abdominal pains and burning in their chests.

Many of them were labourers and rickshaw drivers too poor to afford branded alcohol who stopped for a drink at illegal bars or bought from bootleggers after work on Tuesday.

"The death toll has reached 143," West Bengal health services director Shyamapada Basak told AFP, adding that police had arrested 10 people during an investigation into the tragedy in the South 24-Parganas district.

More than 100 other victims were still in hospital, including a 12-year-old boy who apparently mistook the liquor for water, hospital authorities said.

Bootleg liquor is widely consumed across India and is available in the affected area near the border with Bangladesh for as little as six rupees (11 US cents) for a half-litre, a local resident told AFP.

Methanol -- a type of industrial-strength alcohol used as anti-freeze or fuel -- has been found in the remains of 20 of the victims examined by

doctors, leading to suspicion that the chemical is to blame.

It is sometimes added to "moonshine" in small quantities to increase the alcohol content, but it can cause blindness, liver damage and be fatal.

"Methanol was found in the viscera (organs) of at least 20 victims. It may not be the sole reason for the death. We are investigating," Chiranjib Murmu, superintendent of the local Diamond Harbour hospital, told AFP.

The chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, has announced an inquiry and said the family of each victim will receive compensation of 200,000 rupees (\$3,700).

"I want to take strong action against those manufacturing and selling illegal liquor," Banerjee told a regional television station in Kolkata late Wednesday.

Angry local residents ransacked village breweries and staged protests, police told AFP.

Ganga, a 30-year-old woman whose husband was taken ill, called alcohol the "curse" of nearby villages.

"If the liquor outlets which have sprouted along the railway tracks in the villages are demolished in the morning, they are back by the evening," she told AFP by telephone.

Johnson Edayaranmulah, executive director of the lobby group Indian Alcohol Policy Alliance, said that deaths from adulterated alcohol were common in the country.

He said that if methanol was to blame, it might have been mistaken by

the producers for ethanol, which is less toxic.

"Enforcement is very weak. There is an unholy nexus between the authorities -- police, excise, politicians -- and the bootleggers," he explained.

"Police take bribes, excise officers take bribes, everyone turns a blind eye to this. It shows the corruption that is part of the Indian mindset."

A 2004 World Health Organisation report concluded alcohol abuse was one of the main killers of young Indian men, while an Indian government-funded study the same year found 62.5 million people were unhealthily dependent on alcohol.

Other recent mass poisonings caused by home-brewed alcohol include one in July 2009 when 43 died in the western state of Gujarat, which bans the sale of alcohol.

In May 2008, more than 168 people died in the southern states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

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