

Lead pollution in Zambia town a public health 'emergency': HRW

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Children living in a central Zambian mining town are still exposed to high levels of toxic lead 25 years after the mine closed, Human Rights Watch said Friday, as lawyers announced plans to take legal action.

Decades of lead mining have left Kabwe, around 150 kilometres (95 miles) north of Lusaka, severely polluted, with serious health implications for residents.

The mine, which operated from the early 1900s until its closure in 1994, was at one time the world's largest lead mine. It was run by the Zambian government from the early 1970s when the mining industry was nationalised.

In a report published Friday, HRW said the town in the Copperbelt area still has extreme levels of contamination and children continue to be exposed to high levels of toxic lead in soil and dust around their homes, schools and play areas.

HRW's children's rights fellow and report author Joanna Naples-Mitchell described the situation in Kabwe as "a public health emergency" and said the government was "not responding with the sense of urgency that is warranted".

"The Zambian government is aware that Kabwe has been severely contaminated... since the 1990s and efforts to clean up have been inadequate," she told AFP.

A class action suit is being prepared to demand compensation for poisoning from Anglo American South Africa, a former investor in the mine, London-based law firm Leigh Day announced Friday. The law firm deals in human rights issues.

The case will be brought in courts in South Africa, where the mining firm is based, said the lawyers, who are acting on behalf of some 200 children who have been treated for lead poisoning.

Anglo American on Friday said in a statement it did not believe it was "in any way responsible for the current situation" in Kabwe.

"We were concerned to learn of the situation at Kabwe as reported by the press," it said, adding "the nationalisation more than 40 years ago effectively placed these issues under the control of the Zambian Government".

'Severely contaminated'

The HRW report said that although lead and zinc mining have stopped in the town, various medical studies conducted over the past seven years show children there still had elevated levels of lead in their blood.

Between 2003 and 2011, the World Bank funded a government project to decontaminate Kabwe's affected townships, and to test and treat children. But some 76,000 people, or a third of the town's population, still live in contaminated areas.

One recent study published last year and cited by HRW estimated that more than 95 percent of children in the townships surrounding the lead mine have elevated blood lead levels and that about half of them require medical intervention.

"This is the worst environmental disaster I have seen in 30 years of practice," said lawyer Richard Meeran of Leigh Day.

Johannesburg-based collaborating lawyer Zanele Mbuyisa said they will argue that "the environmental damage created has potentially contaminated almost three generations of men, women and children".

Insufficient resources

Three years ago, the government launched another five-year World Bank-funded project to get rid of the lead and carry out new rounds of testing and treatment.

The project targets around 10,000 people including children, pregnant women and mothers.

"We think this a very important opportunity for the Zambian government to find a lasting solution to this problem," said Naples-Mitchell.

She urged Zambia to find new and effective methods to clean up the lead, adding that their 2018 study indicated that pollution levels were "as high they had been in the 1970s".

In a letter last month, the government indicated to HRW that it does not have enough resources to address the full scale of the contamination.

The government did not immediately comment on the report.

Children are more vulnerable to lead poisoning since they absorb four to five times as much as an adult and this can retard their growth and IQ, while in worst cases it can result in brain damage or even death.

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