



Moscow-based engineering company helps Nigeria clean up mining waste: Demand for gold pushed villagers to bring lead-laced ore to their homes to be processed, sickening many workers

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(Source: Lewiston Morning Tribune, Idaho)By Joel Mills, The Lewiston Morning Tribune, Idaho

July 30--MOSCOW -- Ian von Lindern has seen firsthand the unintended cost of the global economy's lust for natural resources.

From Bunker Hill in northern Idaho to Senegal, his Moscow-based environmental engineering firm has helped clean up the mess left behind by mining and other industrial operations. Their poisons have sickened and killed thousands of people, both told and untold.

But his latest endeavor took even him by surprise.

"Nigeria really eclipses all these others," said von Lindern, president of TerraGraphics.

In May, von Lindern and employee Casey Bartrem traveled to small Nigerian villages at the behest of the Blacksmith Institute, an international aid group that focuses on cleaning up pollution.

The global demand for gold had spurred many of the region's poor farmers to start small mining operations. They unwittingly hauled the lead-laced ore back into their family compounds to be processed, often by women and children.

The resulting contamination has been called the worst-ever case of mass lead poisoning. Hundreds of people have fallen ill or died this year, many of them children.

Von Lindern and Bartrem originally planned to stay only a few days, but the challenge of stripping contaminated soil from so many compounds and replacing it with clean fill was too great. He ended up

staying in the hot, humid region for two months.

And Bartrem returned just this week from nearly three months of cleanup work.

Their journey into the heart of the Nigerian gold-mining crisis started with a phone call from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which was working with Blacksmith to enlist aid for the dying villagers.

When the TerraGraphics team hit the ground, they quickly learned three things had conspired to cause the poisoning. The first two were obvious: the huge increase in small-scale gold mining operations, and the use of ore that contained high levels of lead.

But it was the third factor that led to such widespread poisoning, von Lindern said. Women began processing ore, and since the strict Sharia Muslim law that governs the region forbids them from leaving the family compounds, their work was brought to them.

The culture is also polygamous, with several generations living in each compound. So the miners were bringing deadly levels of lead literally to the doorsteps of thousands of children.

The resulting illnesses were a mystery until local vaccination clinics run by Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) pinpointed the cause in January.



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