More than 100 Sickened in Toxic Mining Spill

CARLA SALAZAR & FRANK BAJAK,Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — More than 100 rural Peruvians have been sickened by the spill of a toxic copper concentrate produced at one of the Andean country's biggest mines, authorities said Friday.

The Ancash state regional health office said 140 people were treated for "irritative symptoms caused by the inhalation of toxins" after a pipeline carrying the concentrate under high pressure burst open in their community.

Most of the injured had joined in efforts to prevent liquid copper slurry from reaching a nearby river after the pipeline linking the Antamina copper mine to the coast ruptured last week in the village of Santa Rosa de Cajacay, said the community's president, Hilario Moran.

"Without taking into account the consequences, we pitched in to help," Moran told The Associated Press by phone.

The people used absorbent fabric provided by the mine but were not given gloves or protective masks, said Antonio Mendoza, the mine's environmental director. Shortly afterward, people became ill, vomiting, suffering headaches and nose bleeds.

"That's unethical and irresponsible and they should know better," Greg Moller, a professor of environmental chemistry and toxicology at the University of Idaho-Washington State University, said of the mining company's enlisting villagers in the cleanup without proper protective gear.

Mendoza said the substance that spilled "was not necessarily toxic."

"It's a dangerous substance to the extent that it's an industrial substance," he said. "They are dangerous substances that require a particular handling but aren't necessarily toxic."

Moller disputed that characterization.

"This was actually a toxic episode and these people are intoxicated," he said, adding that the alkaline copper concentrate likely damaged lung tissue, causing chemical burns.

He said it was his understanding that the rupture released a mist of concentrate, which could have created a fine cloud of toxic airborne particles.

"There are a lot of chemical and physical irritants in that mix," Moller said.

About 30 people were taken to the San Pablo hospital in the highlands regional capital of Huaraz immediately after the July 25 rupture, Moran said. "Some people continue to get sick and continue to go to Huaraz," he added.

The director of the private San Pablo hospital, Raul Guisse, refused to say how many patients were being treated there Friday from the spill. He said he was not authorized by his superiors to provide the information by phone. Peru's Civil Defense agency said July 28 that five children under age 10 were among those sickened.

Moran said Antamina is paying the health care costs of those sickened by the spill. Antamina is a consortium that includes some of the world's biggest mining multinationals, BHP Billiton Ltd. of Australia, Xstrata PLC of Switzerland, TECK Cominco Ltd. of Canada and the Mitsubishi Corp. of Japan.

Peru's Environment Ministry has said it will release details on Saturday of medical exams of the victims.

The company said 45 tons of the concentrate spilled and all but 3 tons were cleaned up.

Moran and Mendoza said the spill was the first from the 190-mile (302-kilometer) pipeline, which delivers copper concentrate to a treatment plant on the coast from which it is loaded as a powder on ships for export to smelters abroad. The company says the pipeline measures between 8-10 inches (21-25 centimeters) in diameter.

Peru is the world's No. 2 producer of copper behind Chile and mining has been central to its recent economic boom, accounting for more than 60 percent of export income. But the environmental costs have had a negative social impact.

Fearing water supplies could be diminished or contaminated, residents of the bordering state of Cajamarca continue to resist a $5 billion gold mining project that would be Peru's largest. The dispute has triggered violence that killed five civilians last month and prompted Peru's government to impose a state of emergency that suspended civil liberties in three provinces. That emergency was extended Friday for another 30 days.

Environmental protection has been relatively lax in Peru. The country did not have an environmental ministry until 2008 and the mining ministry continues to sign off on environmental impact studies for mining projects.

The director of the environmental group Cooperaccion, Jose de Echave, called the Cajacay spill another example of government neglect. He said local authorities in mining districts are unprepared to deal with such incidents and companies have inadequate safety precautions in place.

"What is evident with this spill is that companies in their zones of influence effectively self-regulate. There is no presence of the state to control or regulate," De Echave said.

One of the most serious toxic spills on record in Peru occurred in 2000 in Cajamarca when a tanker truck carrying mercury crashed and broke open in the village of Choropampa, sickening more than 700 people.

The mercury belonged to the Yanacocha consortium, whose majority owner is U.S.-based Newmont Mining Co. and which is in charge of the Conga project that has triggered the opposition in Cajamarca.

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Associated Press writer Franklin Briceno contributed to this report.

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