Villagers Allege Neglect after Toxic Spill

FRANKLIN BRICENO,Associated Press

LIMA, Peru (AP) — More than a month after toxic slurry from a major copper mine sickened scores of people in one of Peru's highland communities, villagers complain that the mining company and the government have done little to help and have even failed to tell some parents that tests showed their children had been poisoned.

Testing eight days after the July 25 pipeline rupture found six children with unacceptably high levels of copper and one with similarly high levels of lead, but none have received any special care, Mayor Felipe Lazaro of Cajacay told The Associated Press.

In fact, he said authorities haven't even identified by name exactly which of the 18 children they tested were poisoned.

Villagers say some children still suffer nose bleeds, nausea and headaches.

"I don't know whether it's ill-will, neglect or what, but I don't understand how the government, after learning which of the children were poisoned, can refuse to identify them," Lazaro said by phone over the weekend. "How are they going to be treated if they haven't even been identified?"

At least 350 Cajacay residents were sickened by the spill of 45 tons of copper concentrate, a mineral stew of volatile compounds. At least 69 were children.

The mine's owner, Antamina, has not responded to repeated AP phone and email requests to identify the toxic components of the slurry and details on medical care it is providing for the spill victims. A document obtained by the newspaper La Republica shortly after the spill described the mixture as "highly toxic."

The company did provide initial medical treatment for the villagers, including 42 who were hospitalized in the community for up to 11 days after the spill.

Mining is the engine of Peru's region-leading economic growth. The country is the world's No. 2 producer of copper, silver and zinc and it is No. 6 producer of gold. But the mining and lax environmental regulations have taken a toll on communities, waterways and livestock.

A deputy environment minister, Mariano Castro, told the AP in mid-August that the government had examined the Cajacay slurry and expected lab results as soon as the following week.

Dr. Ted Schettler, science director of the U.S.-based Science and Environmental Health Network, said results identifying toxic components are key to treating victims properly.

A Health Ministry official, Percy Minaya, told the AP that the poisoned Cajacay children "if they have not been identified will be shortly." The rest of the villagers will know by Sept. 15 if they have been intoxicated, Minaya added.

Last month, Antamina said in a statement that it was "offering the necessary medical support of diverse medical professionals" to the children with unacceptable metal levels.

In all, 18 children between the ages of 2 and 12 and 34 adults had their blood and urine tested for copper, arsenic and lead by the government's occupational and environmental health agency, CENSOPAS. In addition to the poisoned children, one adult was found to have copper above acceptable levels, the agency said.

The U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry says children are especially susceptible to damage from high levels of copper, which can cause liver damage.

"My little boy is still sick. I am not going to stay silent even if I must fight with the government and Antamina, which for me are one and the same," Wilfredo Moran, a 34-year-old villager, told the AP by phone on Friday.

He said his 4-year-old is nauseous nearly every day, vomits after eating and has lost weight.

Yasira Sotela, a 9-year-old who was hospitalized immediately after the spill for profuse nose bleeding "continues to bleed from the nose at least twice a week," her mother, Ines Valverde, told the AP on Friday.

When she goes to the village's medical clinic, "they only give us paracetamol (an over-the-counter analgesic) and say, 'Nothing's wrong. Go home. Don't worry,'" she said.

Senior Peruvian environmental officials answered evasively when asked on Monday about the slurry test results and the villagers' claims of inadequate medical care.

"The state is sometimes accused of being slow," Environment Minister Manuel Pulgar-Vidal said during a meeting with international press when the AP inquired about the two issues. "We are trying to change that."

He said Antamina was in discussions with local authorities and villagers about compensating those affected and establishing a way to cope with health concerns.

Pulgar-Vidal said the government is trying to stiffen penalties for polluters by doubling the top fine, which is currently $13.3 million. Immediately after the spill, he called for the top fine for Antamina.

Antamina is the world's third-largest zinc mine and eighth-biggest producer of copper. It is owned by a consortium including Australia-based BHP Billiton Ltd., Xstrata of Switzerland, Teck-Cominco Ltd. of Canada and Mitsubishi Corp. of Japan.

Critics say Peru's Environment Ministry, established in 2008, is statutorily weak, and President Ollanta Humala's government has proposed legislation that would put it in charge of environmental impact studies for mines, a responsibility currently of the Mining and Energy Ministry.

The Andean nation, which gets more than 60 percent of its export earnings from mining, currently faces more than 100 different social conflicts, most related to environmental contamination or fears of it.

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Associated Press writers Carla Salazar and Frank Bajak contributed to this report.

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