

Gold's Lethal Toll in Indonesia (PBS NewsHour title). /

Filmed by Larry Price, Narrated by P.J. Tobia 6 min 30sec bdcst October 10, 2015

This program includes close captions and subtitles and has an interactive transcript when viewed as part of the Global Environmental Justice documentaries collection on Docuseek2.

In Indonesia, the use of mercury in small-scale gold mining has huge health consequences for those living near mining operations. Toxic plumes and other forms of exposure cause neurological problems, bone deformities, vision loss, deafness and even death.

JUDY WOODRUFF (PBS host) : But first a warning: Our next story contains graphic images of children and adults severely disabled by mercury poisoning. It may be disturbing to some viewers.

The *NewsHour's* P.J. Tobia has the report, the latest in a series by photographer Larry C. Price. It was produced in partnership with the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

Small-scale gold mining is widespread throughout the developing world. It's one of the biggest sources of mercury pollution on earth. The health effects of this heavy metal are dramatic and deadly.

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[00:00:15.98] This is Nyimas. She lives in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Just eight years old, she is the body of an emaciated toddler and severe brain damage. Her head is massively oversized. She suffers from hydrocephalus, a build-up of fluid in the brain. Caring for her is a struggle. Her mother actually chews her food for her before pushing the grains of rice to the child's mouth.

[00:00:43.59] She is still like a baby. At night, she often cries. It's difficult for her to sleep. I have to watch her all night. She'll ask me to turn her over. It's just me by myself. No one else helps.

[00:00:57.32] Nyimas' illness is just one of what some Indonesians call the uncommon diseases. The medical experts say conditions like this are all too common in the area. They call it mercury intoxication. It's called when people ingest the toxic metal.

[00:01:13.56] There are many people burning mercury all around here in front of our house. My husband burns it as well, but I don't let him do it here.

[00:01:22.46] Small-scale gold mining is a major source of income throughout Sulawesi. Liquid mercury is key to the process. It's first used to separate rock and dirt from gold dust in these makeshift factories called ball mills. Later, bare hands form the mercury and gold into a ball. The mercury is next burnt away with torches. Plumes of toxic clouds float through the villages and into the lungs and bloodstreams of inhabitants.

[00:01:51.29] When Nyimas' mother was pregnant with her, her father worked in the gold processing business. The village they live in now has mills that process gold using mercury 24 hours a day. Dr. Stephan Bose-O'Reilly is a volunteer at BaliFokus, an Indonesian non-governmental organization that tries to educate Indonesians about the dangers of working with mercury.

[00:02:10.56] Next to the ball mills, there are these big fish ponds and next to them are the rice fields. And the people here feed on that food on the local fish, on the local rice. And the rice and the fish takes up mercury in the form of metal mercury.

[00:02:28.73] Medical and environmental studies conducted by BaliFokus and the Indonesian government have shown that 10% of people in some parts of the country suffer from mercury intoxication. Mercury poisoning can be found throughout Sulawesi, a poor, centrally located island in the Indonesian archipelago. But small-scale gold mining using liquid mercury can be found throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

[00:02:51.17] According to the UN, it's one of the biggest contributors to global mercury pollution. 10-year-old Dita's parents used to have a mercury burning business. As a toddler, she began to have trouble walking. Over time, her condition worsened. Eventually, this 12-foot bamboo hut became her entire world. Dita's mother suffers from hearing loss and gets headaches, also symptoms of mercury poisoning.

[00:03:15.74] In tests conducted by BaliFokus last spring, 28 children living in or near gold mining hot spots suffered from multiple health issues, including neurological problems, bone deformities, seizures, vision loss, deafness, and paralysis. Since the research was conducted, three of the children died. One of them was Dita. She passed away just last week. But it's not just children. Tahunda is 45 years old.

[00:03:41.63] This man was a healthy farmer living here, doing some mining work like crushing ore. And then a couple of years ago, he started to become sick. He felt that he can't coordinate his movements anymore, that he can't walk properly anymore.

[00:03:59.42] His condition worsened by the month.

[00:04:02.24] This man has a severe neurological disease. It disables him in daily life, so he has problems to follow daily routines. He's severely sick.

[00:04:14.42] Dr. Bose-O'Reilly says Tahunda's illness comes from the gold process surrounding him day and night.

[00:04:19.46] You can see next to his house is a ball mill. You can even hear it here in the room.

[00:04:25.61] According to tests conducted in the area, mercury levels are 50 times safe levels recommended by the United Nations. Pierre worked with mercury most of his life. He's shown here in his mid-60s being tested by a doctor from BaliFokus.

[00:04:39.06] [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

[00:04:42.83] He can barely carry out simple hand-eye coordination tasks, like touching his nose while his eyes are closed or placing these matches back in their box. Pierre died just weeks after these pictures were taken.

[00:04:54.17] The kind of activities is normal. It's not more or less than elsewhere in Indonesia. And there are hundreds of places like this in villages where gold mining is performed and mercury is used.

[00:05:07.67] In 2014, the Indonesian government banned the importation, trade, and use of mercury in small-scale gold mining. But the regulations are not widely enforced and liquid mercury is still easy to come by in places like Sulawesi. Dr. Muchtaruddin Mansyur is the director at the Indonesian Ministry of Health.

[00:05:25.01] He admits that mercury use is widespread throughout the country. Even still, Mansyur says that the government has not done much to stop the use of mercury. People in NY village don't talk much about the dangers of this heavy metal, even as it sickens them.

[00:06:07.04] We've never spoken to our neighbors about it. Nobody in the village discusses this.

[00:06:11.93] So mercury continues to be used, producing golden products and deadly silence.

[00:06:16.43]