Urgent Appeal: Mercury Poisoning among tribal peoples in Peru, Brazil and Venezuela

Source: Survival International, the global movement for tribal peoples' rights

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1. Mercury poisoning is threatening the health and survival of tribal peoples in Peru, Brazil and Venezuela.

2. Exposure to mercury is highly dangerous and can be fatal. Its effects include kidney malfunction, respiratory failure and acute anemia.

3. Mercury poisoning is particularly dangerous for children, pregnant women and fetuses. Babies exposed to mercury in the womb are often born with developmental defects.

4. Tribal peoples are especially susceptible to mercury poisoning due to the large amount of unmonitored activities, such as illegal alluvial gold mining, that take place on their land. Amazonian tribes that eat a lot of fish are particularly at risk due to the high concentrations of mercury often found in this food source.

5. Furthermore, the discriminatory attitudes that States hold towards tribal peoples means little or no action is being taken. As a result, the effects on tribal peoples are disproportionately severe.

6. States have the following obligations towards their indigenous population:
    a. Respect tribal peoples' rights to their lands, environment and resources.
    b. Protect tribal peoples from third parties that threaten their health.
    c. Adequately investigate mercury poisoning and inform any affected populations.
    d. Promptly provide adequate healthcare

7. By failing to both prevent the mercury poisoning and then treat the effects, States have violated the following articles of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR):
    a. Article 2 ICESCR & ICCPR (The right to non-discrimination)
    b. Article 6 ICCPR (The right to life)
    c. Article 11 CESCR (The right to an adequate standard of living)

d. Article 12 CESCR (The right to the highest attainable standard of health)
e. Article 19 ICCPR (The right to access information)

8. In addition, as the States have ratified *ILO Convention No. 169*, they have violated:
    a. Articles 14 and 15 (to protect indigenous peoples' right to their land)
    b. Article 25 (to provide adequate health services)

9. Furthermore, the 'Minamata Convention on Mercury' has been ratified by Peru, and signed by Brazil and Venezuela.
    a. This requires states to control and reduce the release of mercury. Steps should be taken to reduce, and where feasible eliminate, the use of mercury in small-scale gold mining.
    b. Furthermore, parties should provide appropriate healthcare to populations that have been exposed to mercury.

10. The following issues are facing the tribal peoples of Peru, Brazil and Venezuela:

Peru

11. The Nahua live in the Nahua-Nanti Reserve, and were first contacted in the 1980s when their land was opened up to the Camisea Gas Project. This forced contact exposed them to a range of diseases to which they had no immunity. Within a few years, 50% of the population had died.

12. 79% of 106 Nahua tested in the community of Santa Rosa de Serjalí (of a population total of 351 people) have high levels of mercury poisoning. 63% of those affected are children.

13. Symptoms include anemia and renal failure. One child has already died displaying symptoms consistent with mercury poisoning.

14. The Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of the Environment have known about the mercury contamination since 2014. Studies were carried out on the population in the spring of 2015 but the results have not yet been published.

15. The ministries have been unable to identify the source of the mercury poisoning. Possible sources include illegal gold mining and the Camisea Gas Project, however, there is insufficient information on the issue. It is likely that the poisoning occurred through the consumption of fish, which have also been found to contain mercury.

16. It is possible that other communities in the reserve, including the Nanti and Matsigenka, are also suffering from mercury poisoning. However, tests have not yet been conducted to determine the scope of the poisoning.

17. The Ministries of Culture, Health and Environment have failed to work together. Insufficient resources have been directed towards effectively addressing the problem and communities continue to be contaminated.

Brazil

18. The Yanomami and Yekuana live in the Yanomami territory on Brazil's northern border with Venezuela. In the 1950s, various missionaries established a presence in the territory and in the 1970s, a highway was bulldozed through part of the southern area of the territory. This resulted in the death of many Yanomami from diseases such as measles and flu. Several communities were virtually wiped out.

19. In the 1980s, thousands of goldminers illegally invaded the land. Between 1987-1993, nearly 20% of Yanomami died mainly from malaria and other diseases introduced by the miners and in violent conflicts. In 1993, 22 gold miners invaded a Yanomami community and murdered 16 Yanomami including babies, children and old people. Five miners were convicted of genocide.

20. Following a long international campaign, the Brazilian government demarcated the territory. However, despite operations to remove the goldminers, many have returned. It is estimated there are some 5,000 operating illegally today on Yanomami land.

21. In 2014, at the request of Hutukara, a Yanomami Association, scientists from Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (FIOCRUZ) carried out an evaluation of the impacts of mercury contamination in the territory. A preliminary report was published in March 2016.

22. Researchers took hair samples from indigenous communities in two regions which have been the focus of intense illegal mining activities since the 1980s: Paapiu and Waikas.[1]

23. The results showed significant levels of mercury contamination in the regions. Yanomami from Aracaça community, which is near a mining camp, showed "alarming concentrations" with median Hg levels of

[1] For more details, see ISA's website: https://medium.com/@socioambiental/o-povo-yanomami-est%C3%A1-contaminado-por-merc%C3%BArio-do-garimpo-fa0876819312#.4p1ag6i6s

15.5 µg/g- 6.8 µg/g in children under 5 years and 16.0 µg/g in women of reproductive age. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers mercury levels above 6 µg/g to present a high risk of serious health consequences.

24. The Brazilian authorities have known about the mercury contamination among the Yanomami and Yekuana since the 1980s, yet they have done nothing to treat the affected Indians.

25. The Yanomami, along with both Brazilian and international NGOs, have repeatedly denounced the harmful and illegal presence of gold miners over the last two decades. However, despite periodic removals of miners, the authorities have not implemented a coherent and permanent protection plan.

Venezuela

26. Several tribes in Venezuela including the Yekuana, Yanomami, Piaroa, Hoti and Permon are suffering from the devastating impacts of alluvial gold mining on their lands.

27. The harmful effects of mercury contamination in the Guayana region have been known for about 30 years and are the subject of many studies.

28. Alluvial mining was banned in Amazonas state in 1989 (Decree 269, 6 June 1989)

29. In May 2010, the Venezuelan government launched the "Plan Caura" to stamp out artisanal mining in the Caura River Basin. However, despite this effort, mining is still rampant in Bolivar and Amazonas states, and the authorities seem unable to stop it.

30. According to reports from various indigenous organizations, the military and the National Guard collude with miners and share in the profits in return for turning a blind eye to their activities.

31. At the request of Kuyujani, the Yekuana indigenous organization, Venezuelan scientists from Fundación Lasalle de Ciencias Naturales (Campus Guayana), la Sociedad para la Conservación de la Vida Silvestre (WCS-Programa Caura) and La Universidad de Oriente (Núcleo Ciudad Bolívar) carried out research into mercury contamination of indigenous peoples in the Caura Basin in 2011.

32. Their report, "*Evaluación del riesgo de exposición al metal-mercurio en poblaciones ribereñas del Río Caura (Estado Bolívar, Venezuela)",* published in 2013, showed that 92% of Yekuana women in the region had levels of mercury contamination that exceeded the internationally

accepted limit. Even indigenous communities more than 200 kilometers from the mining sites were contaminated.

33. The report further found that 36.8% of the female population studied had levels of mercury contamination that posed a significant risk of causing neurological disorders in unborn babies.

34. As mining has not been stopped in the area, these levels of mercury contamination will continue to increase and harm the health of indigenous peoples.

Recommendations

35. Survival International recommends that the following actions be taken by the States:
    a. Immediately suspend all activities, including illegal alluvial gold mining, that release mercury into indigenous peoples' territories.
    b. Establish a monitoring plan in order to effectively prevent any activities from starting up again.
    c. Tackle the source of any illegal activities, including holding any funders to account. This will also include investigating businesses, entrepreneurs, the military and police.
    d. Restrict the sale of mercury to licensed outlets.
    e. In the short-term, provide indigenous peoples with alternative food sources to any fish that they consume that contain mercury. The long-term aim, however, should be for indigenous peoples to be able to return to fishing, without running the risk of being contaminated.
    f. Carry out a general health survey of tribal populations to determine the extent of the contamination.
    g. Provide permanent medical attention to the affected regions.
    h. Train health staff to detect the symptoms of mercury poisoning early on.

Further details available on request