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Poor Agrochemical Controls Result in Poisoning of 24 Children in Peru

by Guest

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[The following article by Stephanie Boyd is reprinted with the permission of Noticias Aliadas in Lima, Peru. It first appeared in the Nov. 11, 1999, edition of the weekly publication Latinamerica Press.]

Primitiva Jara Conde cannot convince her 6-year-old daughter, Luzmila, to eat. "She'll only drink herbal tea, and she won't get out of bed," Jara says. Mothers throughout the village of Taucamarca are having difficulty persuading their children to eat or play after 44 children who went to school Oct. 22 were poisoned by drinking a government-donated milk substitute contaminated with a highly toxic organophosphate insecticide, probably parathion. Twenty-four died, and the long-term physical and psychological effects on the survivors, many of whom suffered asphyxiation, will not be known for years, if studies are ever carried out in the isolated community 70 km from Cusco.

Nine days after the tragedy, Conde breaks into tears as she relates what happened. "Luzmila came running into the house, shaking furiously, and saying, 'My sister, my sister is dead.' I ran down to the schoolyard to find Grimalda [Luzmila's 9-year-old sister] dead, and other children shaking, vomiting, and dropping to the ground." The government accused community members of "negligence and ignorance" in the handling of dangerous chemicals, although the teacher and several parents acted quickly to induce vomiting.

The initial Health Ministry report described a series of accidents in which poison added to a bag of milk substitute to kill stray dogs was inadvertently mixed with the children's breakfast drink. The school's lone teacher, who was in charge of serving the breakfast, was jailed but released after protests by the Cusco teachers union. The teacher's lawyer says his client is a scapegoat in a campaign to cover up government negligence.

What is clear, observers say, is that the case demonstrates the dangers of uncontrolled pesticide use. "What happened shows us once more the validity of the repeated arguments for demanding the removal of these toxic substances from the market," said Luis Gomero of Peru's Action Network for Alternatives to Agrochemicals (RAAA). The government has focused attention on the illegal trade in banned chemicals, saying analysis showed the culprit to be ethyl parathion, a highly toxic organophosphate banned in Peru and about 24 other countries.

While observers agree that the sale of banned chemicals is a problem, they caution that Peruvian law allows registration of 26 pesticides that the World Health Organization (WHO) considers hazardous or highly hazardous. One of these, methyl parathion, which is legal in Peru as a 2.5% powdered concentrate, could be to blame for the poisonings, said Gomero, who added that restrictions on the sale of the product, which is meant for specific agricultural uses, are not enforced.

Ethyl parathion is usually sold as a liquid, but the woman who allegedly mixed the poison with the milk substitute told investigators she used a powder. The victims' symptoms are consistent with poisoning by various organophosphates, including methyl or ethyl parathion, Gomero said.

RAAA is calling for independent testing that would determine the chemical and concentration, as well as point investigators toward the commercial product used. Gomero said Peru does not need such highly toxic products. Because 800 commercial pesticides are registered in the country, "you could use other products, which are just as effective, and ban the 26 highly toxic pesticides still on the market," he says. Lack of training for agricultural producers, many of whom cannot read labels in Spanish, and the indiscriminate sale of both banned and legal agrochemicals in public markets where they are often displayed beside food add to the safety hazards, said the RAAA.

A spokesperson for the Peruvian Agriculture Ministry, which regulates pesticide use, said the case does not fall under its jurisdiction, because farmers around Taucamarca do not use agrochemicals. But visitors to Taucamarca, including RAAA scientists, found several discarded empty bags of pesticides, including lindane, in fields and paths around the community. Each year about 100,000 people in Peru are poisoned in agrochemical accidents, according to a 1998 RAAA study. Gomero said many more cases probably go unreported. Worldwide, the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) reports more than 220,000 pesticide deaths and about 3 million poisonings, most among farmers in developing countries who lack proper safety equipment and training.

The PAN says pesticide use in developing nations, especially Latin America, is on the rise. A 1998 Brazilian Labor Ministry report on children and adolescents on tobacco plantations said long-term exposure to toxic chemicals can also cause neurological damage, resulting in depression or the loss of reflexes.

The report also noted an increase in cancer and anencephalic births. Scientists say consumers are affected by the accumulation of agrochemicals in their bodies, which leads to cancer, birth defects and possibly sterility. The US-based Worldwatch Institute estimates that pesticide use could probably be halved over the next decade without reducing productivity. Agrochemical use is being challenged by hundreds of global organizations seeking ecological alternatives.

At a May conference in Chile organized by the Action Network for Pesticides and their Alternatives in Latin America (RAP-AL), a coalition of nongovernmental organizations, scientists, and victims of pesticide use from more than 12 Latin American countries demanded citizen participation in drafting legislation and monitoring use. A failed UN attempt to draft an international treaty restricting highly toxic chemicals that last for decades in the environment, known as Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), underscores the resistance to banning even the most poisonous pesticides.

Negotiations in September were marked by controversy over inclusion on the list of four of the "dirty dozen" chemicals, including PCBs and DDT. Representatives from nations with malaria zones worried that banning DDT would lead to new epidemics, even though cheaper, safer alternatives are available. Under the 1998 Rotterdam Convention on trade in hazardous chemicals, if a chemical

has been banned or severely restricted in at least two countries, it cannot be exported without the permission of the receiving country.

Transnational companies, the main beneficiaries of the multibillion-dollar agrochemical industry, sidestep this measure by moving their factories to countries with lax laws or by setting up subsidiaries. In 1989, public pressure forced Bayer to stop making both methyl and ethyl parathion in Germany. Bayer moved its plant to Colombia, where it operates without restrictions.

In Taucamarca, however, no one had ever heard of the anti-pesticide movement, much less laws restricting toxic chemicals. But with advice from RAAA, community leader Daniel Ccoricasa, who lost two children in the poisoning, plans to sue for compensation for victims. Ccoricasa looks at his one surviving child, 9-year-old Freddy, playing alone in the schoolyard after having watched his sister, brother, and best friend die. "I'll call a public assembly so we can begin the legal process," he says. "We do not want this event to be forgotten."

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