

125M worldwide at risk from industrial, mining pollutants

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CAGAYAN DE ORO CITY—Industrial and mining pollutants are putting at risk the health of at least 125 million people worldwide, especially those in the developing world, two environment advocacy groups said in its latest report released on October 24.

The report “2012 World’s Worst Pollution Problems,” released by Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross Switzerland, calculated for the first time the public health impact of pollutants from industrial plants and mining released into the air, water and soil.

The report said the health impact of pollution is the same or higher than some of the most dangerous diseases worldwide, such as malaria or tuberculosis, threatening millions of lives.

“The report underscores the need to fully recognize the health impacts caused by toxic pollution at this critical juncture. Life-threatening pollution is likely to increase as the global economy exerts an ever-increasing pressure on industry to meet growing demands. The damage will be greatest in many low and middle-income countries, where industrial pollution prevention regulations and measures have not kept pace,” Richard Fuller, president of the New York-based Blacksmith Institute, said in a statement.

Dr. Stephen Robinson, Green Cross Switzerland unit manager for Waste, Legacy, said that although it affects nearly 125 million people worldwide, pollution remains “one of the most under-recognized global problems.”

Blacksmith and Green Cross, however, said in the report that the number of affected people is “by no means conclusive, but can be taken as indicative of the potential scale of the problem.”

Robinson lamented that while governments devote large amount of time and resources to combating malaria and tuberculosis, “the striking fact is that international and local government action on these diseases greatly outpaces the attention given to toxic sites, which, as demonstrated in this report, contribute greatly to the global burden of disease.”

Funded by the European Union, the World Bank and Green Cross, Blacksmith investigated more than 2,600 sites in 49 low- and middle-income countries in most regions of the world. Only North Africa and the Middle East are not represented due to what investigators called “security concerns.” The researchers then analyzed data from their own field studies at toxic sites and combined that with census data as well as epidemiological studies to extrapolate an estimate of the health problems involved.

The report said smaller companies that produce products for local markets tended to have the biggest negative health impact.

Using the disability-adjusted life year (DALY)—which is a measure of the number of years an individual loses from a healthy lifespan because of sickness, disability or early death—the researchers calculated that more than 17 million years of healthy life in 49 countries were lost because of pollutants caused by the 10 identified

industries examined.

In comparison, the DALY for malaria is 14 million; 25 million for tuberculosis; and nearly 29 million for HIV.

DALYs allow for comparisons to be drawn between different types of public health risks, taking into account both the severity and duration of a given disease. Chronic headaches for example are given a lower value in the DALY metric than more severe health outcomes such as blindness or cancer.

The report also said it is easier to diagnose and count people with HIV than it is to count the number of children whose brain development is being slowly stunted by chronic exposure to lead from varied industrial sources.

The “2012 World’s Worst Pollution Problems” also identified the top 10 industries and their impact estimates based on the body of research that the field studies provided in combination with toxicological information provided by the World Health Organization and the US Environmental Protection Agency and other public health leaders.

