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HEROIC NGO TAKES ON BIG JOB OF GLOBAL TOXIC CLEANUP

WASHINGTON -- For those of us who have had even the slightest radiation for cancer, the idea of small cities or whole societies being "infected" by pollution, whether of lead, mercury or any one of a number of poisons left behind in careless industrial waste, does not seem so foreign, but it should be terrifying.

My two months of radiation, which I never felt or saw while its rays were being quietly bounced off me by those huge, rumbling machines, at first left me with nothing amiss. After all, the sessions were not even 15 minutes in length. The doctors assured me that if so few as two or four cancer cells had had the temerity to swim in my radiated body, they'd soon be burnt to bits.

As it turned out, apparently they were gone, and at times, I felt that so was I! Repeatedly in the four years after the radiation, I had terrible stomach disturbances. My always perfect teeth now ached. Not surprised, the doctors were more amazed that I had not lost my teeth because the radiation caused horrible cavities. How long could its effects last? My oncologist told me, "From five to 20 years." What a God-forsaken "cure"!

I mention my own experience with the lingering effects of these strong cures because we are now seeing remarkable work being done internationally by individual Americans to clean up toxic waste spots on a major scale. It is big-time compared to my petty radiated teeth complaints, but it is nevertheless comparative. Moreover, this weekend we are celebrating Earth Day, in an era when Americans, under an environment presidency, are beginning to realize that we must cleanse the Earth (and sometimes, yes, ourselves).

Americans are pretty used to NGOs now (non-government organizations), spontaneously formed by individuals from many countries who go into foreign lands to oversee elections, to teach good electioneering, to save trees and water supplies and to be certain that the past is not forgotten. (The ones pushing free elections are, as we speak, being thrown out of Egypt.) But until this Earth Day, the May Day of environmentalists, few NGOs have formed to combat the life-threatening problems of toxic pollution in poor countries.

The group now making progress is the international not-for-profit Blacksmith Institute. Blacksmith was started by an academic, Richard Fuller, 13 years ago and has to date located some 2,500 sites in scores of countries in need of cleanup. Everything from lead poisoning in Senegal (local people had been recycling used car batteries to retrieve the roughly \$10 worth of lead in each battery), to the poisoning of 4.5 million women

the roughly \$10 billion of lead in each country), to the poisoning of the unborn women and 600,000 children by toxic mercury left behind from gold mining across the world.

Blacksmith is funded by donations and grants from the World Bank and virtually all the major foundations and donor groups, and has an impressive technical board, but it is not a cheery presence. It is known for its annual World's Worst Report, for the Blacksmith Index (used internationally to rate levels of health risk from pollution), and for the Blacksmith Database, which currently documents more than 2,100 of the world's worst polluted sites. And the organization always -- always -- works with the people on the ground. That is one of the absolutes of its philosophy.

Some of the work is so simple the teams involved cannot quite believe it. In one situation in Senegal, for instance, Blacksmith teams moved in when officials reported the lead poisoning threat to millions of children who could grow up unable to learn properly or control their limbs. Basic engineering tools such as bulldozers and dump trucks had only to remove the top 8 inches of soil from the roads and open areas to help solve the lead problem.

This is truly yeoman's work. It is work that CAN be done and that most governments WANT done. Thus it is fraught with few of the problems of other NGOs that tend to be more involved with politics. Out of their New York and London offices, the Blacksmith people have found a new and effective way to do good in the world -- a way we should all study in a world getting more toxic by the day. COPYRIGHT 2012 UNIVERSAL UCLICK