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'2012 World's Worst Pollution Problems' Report Finds Toxic Air May Be As Harmful As Malaria

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A Bangladeshi man sorts tannery waste for poultry and fish feed on the banks of the Buriganga River in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Wednesday, Oct. 10, 2012. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad)



By Jonathan Allen

NEW YORK, Oct 23 (Reuters) - Pollution from factories and mines is putting the health of 125 million people at risk worldwide and is as dangerous in the developing world as malaria or tuberculosis, according to a report published on Tuesday by two environmental advocacy groups.

The researchers behind the "2012 World's Worst Pollution Problems" report say theirs is the first substantial attempt to estimate the number of people sickened or killed worldwide because they work in or live near tanneries, recycling plants, chemical factories or mines, among other toxic industries.

"Appropriately, large amounts of time and resources are devoted to addressing the burden of diseases like tuberculosis and malaria," said Stephan Robinson, a researcher at Green Cross

Switzerland, which produced the report with the Blacksmith Group, a New York-based non-profit environmental organization.

"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," he said.

Researchers examined more than 2,900 active or shuttered industrial sites in 49 low- and middle-income countries and estimated the health impact of pollutants - such as lead, mercury or chromium - on the people who live nearby or work at the sites, often producing goods or providing services for people in richer countries.

The advocacy groups noted that their numbers "are by no means conclusive, but can be taken as indicative of the potential scale of the problem," adding that they expected the figures to be underestimates of the full scale of the problems.

Researchers 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 cautioned that in many cases the data were "very limited."

Smaller companies, often producing for local markets, tended to have the biggest negative health impact. No specific companies were named in the report.

Researchers used the notion of a disability-adjusted life year, or DALY, which is a measure of the number of years an individual loses from a healthy lifespan because of sickness, disability or early death.

In those 49 countries, representing about two-thirds of the world's population, they estimated more than 17 million years of healthy life were lost because of pollutants caused by the 10 industries examined, compared to 14 million for malaria, 25 million for tuberculosis and nearly 29 million for HIV.

It is easier, the report said, 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. (Editing by Daniel Trotta, desking by Gary Crosse)

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