

Dominican town looks to clean pollution

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HAINA, Dominican Republic --

After a decade of complaints about persistent headaches and sick children, one of the world's most polluted towns met Wednesday for the first time with a company whose former battery recycling plant is blamed for dangerously high lead levels in the townspeople.

The result: a promise of new studies on how to clean up the mess.

"We're beyond bickering, and starting to confront this problem," said Richard Fuller, president of the New York-based Blacksmith Institute, which last year listed Haina on its list of the 10 most polluted places in the world.

Dominican government officials and a company accused of leaving fields strewn with lead powder from the shuttered recycling plant agreed to have a team of experts from the University of Idaho evaluate the site next month to determine what is necessary to remove the pollution. Several months after that, they'll meet again to discuss how to pay for it, participants said.

Government officials in the Caribbean nation have said they do not have the money. The company that ran the battery plant from 1979 to 1997, Metales y Oxido S.A., says it is not entirely to blame.

"Haina is an industrial zone," company vice president Juan Arturo Biaggi said after the meeting. "There were a lot of factories there, not just us."

Omar Dotel, who represented the company known as Metaloxa at the meeting, said it acknowledges some responsibility and is "extremely willing to take whatever steps the government and the parties agree are necessary."

Sandra Castillo, a 33-year-old neighborhood activist, said she "saw a lot of positive things come out of the meeting," but had hoped for more.

Castillo began campaigning to shut the factory and clean up the site when her daughter was stricken with bouts of vomiting and her son began experiencing seizures. Doctors told her it was a result of lead poisoning, which can cause irreversible brain and tissue damage.

Metaloxa buried the remaining material, but it was uncovered several years later by rain, wind and scavengers seeking scrap metal.

The Dominican government said in 1999 that the site would be cleaned up, but little was done.

In 1997, New York-based Friends of Lead-Free Children, found that 91 percent of neighborhood children had lead levels considered to be dangerous by the World Health Organization. And when WHO researchers returned last year, they found soil samples that were 50 percent lead, creating toxic sludge that inundates homes at the bottom of a hill when it rains, Null said.

"It never occurred to us that when the government said it was cleaned up, that they just buried everything," Null said.

Zoila Gonzalez, an environment ministry official, said the government has lacked the money for a proper cleanup because of other pressing needs.

"The secretary is very concerned about this problem, but it is one of many," Gonzalez said.

On a recent afternoon, children jumped over barbed wire to play where the factory once stood, pushing around black dust and battery casings with sticks and eating passion fruit off the nearby trees.

Bienvenida Bautista, a fourth- and fifth-grade teacher in the town's public school, said she sees more students with severe learning disabilities and physical deformities than in other places she has taught.

"Children who have the lead don't learn anything. Their future will be ugly," she said.