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Paraquat Incident Reports from Mindanao, Philippines.

Information adapted from a Fact Finding Mission by Pesticide Action Network Philippines, conducted in January and May 2012 and supported by IPEN and PAN AP.

A fact-finding and medical missions to investigate reports of poisoning from highly hazardous pesticides, particularly paraquat, in bananas and oil palm plantations were conducted in Mindanao, Philippines on January 15-18 and May 10-13, 2012. The fact-finding missions (FFM) were led by Dr. Romy Quijano from PAN Philippines. The Community Based Health Services (CBHS) from Mindanao facilitated visits to areas of concern in banana plantations in Surigao del Sur and oil palm plantations in Agusan del Sur.

A doctor from CBHS gave a briefing on the situation of farmers and indigenous people in Surigao del Sur who have been forced to lease their land and work for the plantation under intimidation and harassment by local government officials and the military, especially against those who resisted the expansion of the plantation. Below is a summary of the pesticide-related aspects of the FFM (read full report: <http://panap.net/en/p/post/pesticides-campaigns-paraquat/1488>)

Banana plantation workers in Surigao del Sur, Mindanao who chose to remain anonymous for security reasons claimed that they often experience burning sensation and itchiness of the skin and face, difficulty of breathing, dizziness, abdominal pain, diarrhea and other symptoms; especially those spraying the pesticides. The plantation had used paraquat and recently had begun using glyphosate. The plantation borders were only a few meters away from houses in the village. Empty pesticide plastic bags laid scattered on the ground and people interviewed affirmed that often the plastic bags were reused for different purposes. In a second trip in May 2012 to this area, a woman indigenous leader showed her rice farm that was damaged, it looked burned consistent with the effect of the herbicide, according to her due to herbicide spray drift from the adjacent banana plantation to her farm. She also expressed fears of being harmed because harassments continue and a military detachment was set up nearby to protect the banana plantation. She claimed that she and the members of her family, especially her grandchildren, were suffering from increased incidence of various ailments such as skin disease, respiratory disease and gastrointestinal disease due to the chemicals being used by the plantation. She said more people were being affected but according to her, they were not speaking out because they were afraid that if they complained, the armed groups protecting the interests of the plantation would harm them.

In Rosario, Agusan del Sur, at a community assembly in an oil palm plantation most of the health complaints were burning sensation and damage to the skin and nails, especially on the hands and feet. Several workers complained of damage to their eyes, difficulty of breathing and chemical burns on their bodies due to pesticide spills from the backpack sprayer. The workers identified

Gramoxone (paraquat) as the most common pesticide to which they were exposed to but they could not identify most of the other pesticides to which they were exposed because they were not labelled. The workers were examined medically and the findings were consistent with the workers' health complaints. Most of the findings were chemical burns in the skin, mainly on the hands and feet with signs of scarring, discoloration, loss of melanin pigmentation and erosion of the nails and fingertips, which are known to be the result of exposure to the herbicide paraquat. At a second visit in May 2012 to this area, medical examinations were done on each of the workers (about 15) who came to the meeting. Most of the findings were similar to what had been seen on the first visit, mostly chemical burns on the torso, hands and feet with the characteristic appearance typical of paraquat effects. Some exhibited respiratory symptoms and others showed signs and symptoms of neurological damage, including paresthesias and tremors. Still others exhibited blurring of vision and opacities in the eye. Some exhibited cardiovascular disease, including hypertension. Medications and medical advice were given to each patient. The workers were informed that they could approach the CBHS for further assistance regarding their health problems.

In Trento, Agusan del Sur, a community assembly in a town next to an oil palm plantation was attended by a dozen plantation and mill workers. Most of the workers have performed different kinds of jobs, from weeding to spraying, to utility men, etc. Most of the health complaints were signs and symptoms of chemical burns on the skin typical of paraquat toxicity. Respiratory symptoms such as asthmatic-like symptoms, coughing and easy fatigue were also common. Some complained of deterioration of their vision and one was blind in one eye due to traumatic injury and exposure to chemicals. The workers were provided with some medications when appropriate and were advised on some simple ways, including utilization of herbal medicines, to alleviate their symptoms. Some of the workers needed to be sent for further medical and laboratory examination in a government hospital (about 50 km away) and were provided some financial support.

At the second visit in May 2012 to the oil palm plantation in Trento, Agusan del Sur a dozen workers were medically examined, more than half were new patients. Most of the findings were abnormalities of the skin, mainly on the hands and feet with signs of scarring, discoloration, loss of melanin pigmentation and erosion of the nails and fingertips. In some of the patients, there were scarring from chemical burns due to paraquat spillage on the body. Some of the patients exhibited respiratory problems, including difficulty of breathing, cough and presence of abnormal respiratory sounds indicative of obstruction and excessive secretions inside the lungs. Others exhibited cardiovascular abnormalities, including hypertension, neurologic signs and symptoms, and eye disturbances, including blurring of vision, and in one patient, blindness due to corneal opacity, most likely due to paraquat exposure. The patients were given medications and medical advice, informing them that the CBHS is willing to consider any request of further medical assistance. Inside the oil palm plantation, the FFM team observed that the workers' family members, including children, were washing clothes and taking a bath in the stream inside the plantation

where pesticide run-off is likely. This could explain the narrative of the workers that their children often suffer skin ailments and other diseases, which they suspect were due to pesticides used in the plantation.

Interviews and medical examination of workers exposed to Paraquat used in oil palm plantations in Rosario and Trento, Agusan del Sur

1. R. G., 38 years old, sprayer. She started working for the plantation in 1983. In a work-related incident she spilled pesticides on her back, burning her buttocks. She has been using Paraquat/Gramoxone and Round-up. She has been experiencing eye itchiness and difficulty in breathing after spraying pesticides. Positive for corneal opacity and cataract.
2. C. A., 46 years old, sprayer. She has been using Paraquat/Gramoxone, Round-up and Malathion. Symptoms experienced: Itchiness and burning sensation in the skin and eyes, coughing.
3. M.R., 46 years old, sprayer. She started working for the plantation when she was 20 years old. She has been using Paraquat/Gramoxone. She has been experiencing the following symptoms after spraying: nosebleed, dizziness, constant cough and colds.
4. M. D. 77 years old, retired employee, used to work as weed-cutter, planter, bagger of seedlings. He started working for the company when he was only 11 years old. He accidentally drank Paraquat/Gramoxone several years back as he thought it was a Cobra energy drink. Suffered abdominal pains, vomiting, difficulty of breathing, dizziness. He had been experiencing recurrent headache, blurred vision, difficulty of breathing. He resigned from work in 1999.
5. A. N., 73 years old, started working in the plantation in 1980, all-around worker, including spraying of pesticides. Stopped working for the plantation in 1991 due to poor health. Complained of blurred vision, body pains, numbness and tingling sensation of extremities, and easy fatigue.
6. J.A., 59 years old. He started working in 1981 doing various jobs: weed cutter, planter, sprayer, harvester. He voluntarily resigned from the company after getting sick which he says was due to chemical exposure, resulting to peptic ulcer, kidney, skin disease, and tuberculosis. Complained of blurred vision.
7. D. G., 47 years old, used to work as harvester and sprayer, using Paraquat/Gramoxone and Round-up. He vomited blood, had difficulty breathing, blurred vision, skin disease.
8. J. H., 20 years old. Seasonal worker in the plantation. Claimed to have experienced skin itchiness and later developed skin disease after collecting frogs from the river inside the plantation.

9. P. N., 61 years old, weed cutter, planter, harvester, circle weeder and sprayer. Complained of recurrent cough and colds, difficulty of breathing, easy fatigue, frequent diarrhea, kidney disease and blurring of vision. He had been seen by government doctors and was told to have pulmonary disease due to paraquat exposure.
10. M. B., 52 years old, had been a sprayer for a long time. Experienced dizziness, difficulty of breathing, itchiness and burning sensation in the skin and eyes. White patches on skin appeared after two years of working.
11. F. C., 54 years old, started work in 1997 as press operator. Complained of itchiness of the skin, which later developed into white patches.
12. R. B., 56, years old, worked in the nursery and as sprayer. Used the pesticides Gramoxone, Round-up, Karate and Tango. Complained of difficulty of breathing, weakness, itchiness and burning sensation in the eyes and skin, especially at the back beneath knapsack sprayer, blurring of vision and hoarseness of voice. He had pneumonia in 2010, which he thinks was due to pesticide exposure.
13. D. H., 55, years old, sprayman. Used Gramoxone, Round-up and Baythroid. Complained of dizziness, blurring of vision and tearing(eyes) especially when spraying.
14. E. A., worked as sprayman for several years. Experienced itchiness and burning sensation of the skin, especially when there is a pesticide spill from the knapsack sprayer. Developed white patches in the skin.
15. R. C., 50 years old, started work in 1997 as harvester and sprayer. Had itchiness of the skin and eyes. Hit in the eye by falling oil palm fruit in 1999. He later developed white opacity in the eye, which led to blindness.
16. M. M., 42 years old, fertilizer applicator and sprayman. Used Gramoxone and Round-up. Complained of dizziness, headache, difficulty of breathing and sometimes fever at night.