

COMMENTARY

## Liuzhou scare brings to mind local tragedy

Published: [3/02/2012](#) at 12:00 AMNewspaper section: [News](#)

Liuzhou and Mae Tao are over a thousand kilometres apart, but the two communities have come up against the same awful threat \_ cadmium poisoning.

I must confess I'd almost forgotten about the hardship residents of the Mae Tao river basin in Tak's Mae Sot district faced seven years ago, from cadmium contamination of their paddy fields, waterways and even their blood. But reports of the cadmium spill that is now threatening millions of people in China's southern city of Liuzhou have brought to mind the Mae Tao saga.

The ongoing cadmium contamination in Liuzhou was exposed on Jan 15. The toxic substance, suspected to have been discharged by a mining company, has polluted a long stretch of two rivers. The city's water supply is under threat and panicked residents have rushed to stockpile bottled water.

The Chinese authorities are still struggling to neutralise cadmium levels in the rivers with clean water and chemicals.

Liuzhou residents might have no idea what could happen to them if the cancer-causing cadmium is allowed to seep into their lives.

But thousands of residents in Thailand's tambons Mae Tao, Mae Ku and Phrathat Pha Daeng, know only too well what it is like to live under the pall of cadmium contamination.

They know how it feels when ordered to destroy their paddies and to stop planting rice, after authorities detected dangerously high levels of cadmium in rice samples there.

They have suffered various kinds of disease \_ from renal failure, kidney malfunction and gall stones, to osteoporosis and cancer \_ due to prolonged exposure to cadmium.

However, what hurt Mae Tao residents most was probably the fact that no one really cared about their suffering, nor tried to stop the deadly substance from spreading further and killing them slowly.

The Mae Tao cadmium saga began in 2004, when foreign scientists from the [International Water Management Institute](#) found that several hundred villagers in the three tambons had high levels of cadmium in their blood.

Seven years have passed but there is still no official conclusion as to the cause of the cadmium contamination which covered an area of 13,200 rai. Villagers have accused the giant zinc mining firm, Padaeng Industry, which operates a zinc mine nearby, of being the polluter.

Chulalongkorn University researchers, meanwhile, suspect that the contamination was a result of naturally occurring cadmium levels in the soil, exacerbated by human activity such as mining.

Instead of trying to identify the source of contamination and containing it, the government ordered villagers to switch from growing rice to sugarcane for ethanol production, as the officials were afraid that cadmium-tainted rice would destroy Thai rice exports.

Not many villagers joined the crop-switching scheme, however.

A recent visit by staff from a non-governmental organisation found most of Mae Tao's residents were still consuming rice harvested from cadmium-contaminated paddy fields, while the number of residents falling ill has continued to climb over the years.

At present, over 840 Mae Tao villagers have been diagnosed with unusually high levels of cadmium. Forty of them have been suffered renal failure and 219 have developed kidney problems.

Mae Tao's residents are not the only victims of hazardous substances contamination. Lead contamination caused by mining in Lower Klity village in Kanchanaburi's Thong Pha Phum district, is another major example.

A number of resident from this Karen community have died after becoming ill from lead poisoning over the past years.

Some 151 Klity villagers won a historic lawsuit in 2010 when the court ordered a lead mining company to pay 36 million baht in compensation to these affected villagers. However, the company lodged an appeal and now the Kanchanaburi Court will rule on Feb 10 whether to uphold the lower court's ruling.

The Liuzhou cadmium spill should serve to remind us that there are people still suffering from cadmium contamination in our own country.

These people have been ignored for so long, while suspected polluters and government officials who failed to contain the contamination and clean up the environment are still roaming unpunished.

The Chinese toxic spill should also serve as a wake-up call for Thai authorities to tighten pollution control and environmental protection regulations, so as to prevent more innocent people from becoming victims of toxic contamination.

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