

12 arrests made in Nigeria tainted formula case

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By BASHIR ADIGUN
Associated Press Writer

Authorities have arrested 12 people in a tainted teething formula case in Nigeria that killed 84 children after they swallowed a syrup laced with a chemical normally found in antifreeze, health officials said Wednesday.

Dr. Paul B. Orhii, director-general of the National Agency for Food and Drug Administration and Control, said in a statement that authorities were seeking the maximum penalty of 15 years in jail.

Five of those arrested were operators of Barewa Pharmaceuticals Ltd., while the other seven worked for the supplier of the tainted chemical, officials said.

"We will henceforth zealously prosecute people who violate good manufacturing practices and manufacture dangerous products that hurt or kill Nigerians," Orhii said in the statement.

Barewa has been shut down and officials said Wednesday it would remain closed until investigations are concluded.

At least 111 children have been sickened since the tainted batch of My Pikin Baby Teething Mixture hit store shelves in mid-November. The children suffered fever, convulsions, diarrhea and vomiting, and were unable to urinate after being given the formula.

Health officials have said that the dead ranged in age from 2 months to 7 years old.

Orhii said Wednesday that no new cases had been reported for more than a month, but that a public awareness campaign through television, radio and posters would continue.

Many bottles of the paracetamol-based formula were found to have a high concentration of diethylene glycol, a chemical commonly found in antifreeze and brake fluid, and sometimes used illegally as a cheaper alternative to glycerin, which thickens toothpaste.

Orhii said that an investigation showed Barewa Pharmaceuticals staff had purchased the raw material in a jerry can instead of an original container; the chemical turned out to be diethylene glycol mislabeled as propylene glycol.

Health officials said earlier that Barewa Pharmaceuticals appears to have been told it was purchasing propylene glycol, a normal ingredient in the teething formula. They said the pharmaceutical company had always bought that ingredient through approved channels before, but had turned to a new source for the ingredient used in the tainted batch.

Nigeria is a vast, chaotic country of 140 million people and has been plagued by tainted, fake or untested drugs since it gained independence from Britain in 1960. About 200 babies died in 1990 under similar circumstances, also from diethylene glycol.

In addition, the West African country has a long history of poor enforcement of its own regulations, with corruption rampant among police and government officials.

The food and drug administration, however, has drawn plaudits from Nigerians in recent years for having cut down on counterfeit or dangerous medicines.

Diethylene glycol also has been implicated in poisoning cases around the world, including in Panama, where at least 116 people died in 2006 after taking contaminated cough syrup, antihistamine tablets, calamine lotion and rash ointment made at a government laboratory.

Note:

Diethylene glycol, a chemical normally used in antifreeze, is the solvent used in the elixir of sulfanilamide in the 1930's in the USA and led to the development of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act by the US Congress.