**The negative effects of toxic and hazardous substances on women in Africa**

**Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights**

**Introduction**

The reality of the African continent and its industrial, security, economic, and commercial variables reveal a widespread of toxic and dangerous materials and their waste, to the point that they are having negative effects on human rights at all levels. These negative effects affect all groups including men, children, and women. Monitoring and follow-up reveal that African women are considered one of the most vulnerable groups affected by the negatives and dangers of toxic and hazardous substances, in a way whose negative consequences intersect with the civil, economic, and social rights of African women. In this context Elizka Relief Foundation submits its report to the Special Rapporteur on toxics and human rights; It attempts to review the negative effects of the spread of toxic and hazardous substances in Africa in general, and essentially monitors human rights violations in this sector and its negative effects on women in both Ethiopia and Niger and presents a set of relevant recommendations.

**First: Spread of toxic and hazardous substances on the African continent in general.**

On the African continent, causes of the spread of toxic and hazardous substances vary by the reality of the African environment, including security, climatic, and commercial factors, and the activities of mining companies and fossil fuel industries, in a way that causes a dangerous and severe spread of toxic and hazardous substances on the African continent, causing pollution of the air, water, environment, and soil, and the spread of diseases and epidemics. Perhaps the extractive, mining, and fossil industries are the primary cause of the spread of toxins and their risks. Internationally, it affects 23 million people, exposing them to unsafe levels of lead, zinc, copper, and arsenic, whether in dusty air, drinking water, or food grown on polluted lands[[1]](#footnote-1). It also contributes to more than 75% of global greenhouse gas emissions and about 90% of carbon dioxide emissions, in addition, it leads to increased outdoor air pollution, which kills 7 million people annually worldwide and is the second largest cause of death, killing 1.1 million people in Africa annually. [[2]](#footnote-2)

With the extractive and mining industries sector being one of the largest sectors operating on the African continent, the levels of toxic and hazardous materials and waste affecting the countries of Africa are rising. At present, the latest project of the French oil company “Total Energies”, the East African Crude Oil Pipeline Project (EACOP), releases 379 million tons of carbon dioxide into global emissions, further polluting vital water, wetlands, and food resources, including Lake Victoria Basin, which more than 40 million people depend on for drinking water and food production in Africa[[3]](#footnote-3). A recorded range of toxic and hazardous materials in **West Africa** are linked to spills and oil leaks that contaminate the environment and human, animal, plant, and aquatic life, especially in the Niger Delta, to the extent that since 2016, Nigeria has monitored about 692 oil spills in Rivers State, and subsequently announced its need for more than 12 billion $ to clean up oil pollution and restore environmental health in just one of Nigeria's crude oil-producing states, according to March 2024 statistics[[4]](#footnote-4).

As for **Central Africa**: especially in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the spread of hazardous and toxic materials can be traced back to mining projects managed by Chinese and French companies, The Democratic Republic of Congo held the French-British multinational company Perenco responsible for 167 pollution incidents and massive methane emissions that occurred inside the Congo[[5]](#footnote-5).

In light of extrapolating these statistics, it can be said that toxic and dangerous substances would have a negative impact on the human rights of African citizens, especially women’s rights. Because it threatens her reproductive health and fertility rates, in addition to exposing her to infertility problems, egg damage, early menstruation in girls, breast cancer, and other reproductive health problems such as fibroids. It also has a role in causing women to suffer from hormonal and physiological imbalances, as a result of exposure to toxic chemicals. As women's bodies store more pollutants in their tissues than men's, their bodies are exposed to higher rates of sensitivity to toxins during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

**Second: the negative impact of toxic and hazardous substances on women in Ethiopia and Niger**

Observing the reality of the mining sector in Ethiopia and Niger shows that governments of both counties welcome and embrace the expansion in the mining and extracting industries sector, without giving any consideration to its negative effects and its role in activating toxic and hazardous substances that pollute water and soil which furtherly harms the livelihoods of all societies’ segments and their human rights. Given the reality observed African women in Niger and Ethiopia are proven to be the most vulnerable to the dangers of toxic substances and their secretions resulting from mining activities, and this can be reviewed as follows:

**A - Ethiopia**

While the causes of the spread of toxic and hazardous substances are increasing, women’s opportunities for being exposed to the negative repercussions and effects of these toxins increase within Ethiopian society, especially in areas that contain large mineral deposits, such as Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Tigray, the Somali region, and the southern regions[[6]](#footnote-6). The wide spread of toxins and toxic chemical waste and their negative impact on Ethiopian women are evident inside unlicensed gold mines, as reading the national environmental assessment tests related to the Goji region it can be noted that arsenic levels in the water increased by 98 micrograms per liter, compared to the World Health Organization standard of 10 micrograms per liter, in addition to a higher mercury content in the water about 37 times than the World Health Organization standard for drinking water, and the spread of toxic cyanide. Complaints of citizens especially women and girls residing near mining sites reveal high rates of poisoning, water pollution, miscarriages, and high rates of births with congenital disabilities at a much higher rate compared to people residing in other regions far from mining sites in Ethiopia.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**B - Niger**

The government of Niger pays remarkable attention to resource extracting companies and their contracts, for which it encourages investment expansions in uranium mines, without any consideration of the subsequent spread of toxic and hazardous materials and their negative effects on the population, especially on women, girls, and children. The extractive industries in Niger produce one million tons of radioactive waste annually and consume between 7 and 10 million cubic meters of water annually to treat the ore and pollution resulting from extractive activities. It also leads to people being exposed to high and dangerous levels of radiation estimated at around 450,000 Becquerel/kilograms, which is a rate considered much higher than internationally recognized safe levels of radiation declared since 2009[[8]](#footnote-8).

Since March 2023, Tracking the extracting activities paths in Arlit village located in northern Nigeria proves that “Orano” the French company working on the village has already left 20 million tons of radioactive waste inside the village after completing its work and deciding to close a uranium mine that it was managing inside the village, which caused widespread of waste over an area of 120 hectares at a high that reaches 35 meters (114 feet). This means that widespread toxins and hazardous materials and their negative effects will be part of the reality of the population in Niger for a long time, especially women and girls, being the most fragile and vulnerable groups in the society.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Recommendations**

Elizka Relief Foundation makes recommendations to both the Special Rapporteur on toxics and Human Rights and to the governments of Ethiopia and Niger as follows:

A -Elizka recommends both the governments of Niger and Ethiopia conduct assessments and analyses of the environmental and humanitarian impact of extractive industries' negative activities within the two countries, and rely on these analyses to come up with legislations that regulate the work of resource extraction companies within those countries, in a way that does not conflict with Safety and security standards for local societies.

B - The Foundation draws the attention of Ethiopia’s government to its need to develop plans for the voluntary resettlement of residents, away from areas close to mines and mining activities, as an attempt to avoid the negative health impacts of extractive industries and their toxic and hazardous substances.

C – We call on the Special Rapporteur to provide technical support to the governments of Niger and Ethiopia in developing policies to address the severe negative impacts resulting from the activities of extractive industries on rivers, air, and climate change, by launching programs to protect and clean rivers, redevelop and upgrade water quality and filter it from pollution, and increase green areas and stop cutting down forests.

D –Elizka calls on the rapporteur to cooperate with African governments, to help them enhance the social and legal responsibility of mining and extractive companies, and oblige them to respect human rights related to hazardous materials and waste.

E – We call on the governments of Ethiopia and Niger to reconsider policies responding to the risks of waste and toxic substances and amend them in a way that ensures the inclusion of the gender and social dimension within them and takes into account the risks that these industries cause to women.

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3. Reuters, Environmental groups file complaint against France's TotalEnergies over climate impact, 2 October 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/m938xaas> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. France 24, Cleanup of oil-polluted Nigerian state would cost $12 bn: report, 16 Mai 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/u5e6p2ux> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Investigate Europe, Toxic fumes and leaks: Perenco’s polluting oil business in Democratic Republic of Congo, 9 November 2022, <https://urlis.net/3gfyspih> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. MONGABAY, Coal mining threatens Ethiopia’s ancient coffee forest, 14 June 2022, <http://rb.gy/e6jq5> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. ADDIS Standard, News: Human Rights Watch says companies “took no action” over gold mine pollution in Guji, urges gov’t to halt resumed mine operations, April 2023, <http://rb.gy/5pek8> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. CANADIAN MINING, Orano rekindles interest in Imouraren uranium project in Niger, 5 April 2023, <https://bit.ly/3MIXpJJ> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. RFI, Worry, mistrust meet plans to secure waste from Niger uranium mine, 15 Mars 2023, <https://bit.ly/3mGKwp1> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)