

Sent: Thursday, September 25, 2003 6:50 PM

Subject: REPORT: MILLIONS DRINK CONTAMINATED WATER IN INDIA

Report says millions of people drink contaminated water in India's most populous state

September 2003

U.S. Water News Online

LUCKNOW, India -- Millions of people in India's most populous state are drinking water contaminated with traces of cadmium, fluoride, arsenic, nitrates and lead, says a recently released government report.

Groundwater sources in 36 districts in northern Uttar Pradesh state were not fit for drinking, said the study by the state's Water Works Department.

Nearly 70 percent of the state's 166 million people lack access to safe drinking water.

``Water was tested from 20,000 hand pumps across the state. Samples of 11,021 hand pumps were found to contain water contaminated with carcinogenic elements," said Rashid Khan, general manager of the Water Works Department.

Arsenic contamination of groundwater is a serious problem in India and Bangladesh.

Low concentrations of arsenic can slowly build up in the body, eventually causing cancers, skin diseases and other illnesses. Prolonged exposure to arsenic can cause kidney, liver, intestinal, neurological, cardiovascular and respiratory disorders.

Groundwater is the main source of drinking water for India's poor. Nearly 70 percent of India's more than 1.2 billion people live in villages.

An expert called the Uttar Pradesh report frightening.

``Probably this is the reason why the number of cancer patients in Uttar Pradesh state has almost doubled in the past 10 years," said Neeraj Bora, the state president of the Indian Medical Association.

About 2,300 cancer patients visit King George's Medical College hospital in Lucknow, the state capital, every month. Eight years ago that figure was less than 1,000.

``We are now getting patients from smaller towns," said Mahesh Sarin, a doctor at the hospital that houses the main cancer treatment facility in the state.

Scientists say improper disposal of industrial and municipal waste has led to contamination of groundwater source.

“The contamination is high in industrial towns,” said Rahul Diwakar Singh at Lucknow-based Industrial Toxicology Research Center.

Pesticides and insecticides seep into the ground with rain water and contaminate the sources.

Once the groundwater gets contaminated, it is almost impossible to undo the damage. The government says it's working on the problem and will soon initiate corrective measures.