

# Feature: Climate change-inspired coal seam fires a threat to human life

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SIX-YEAR-OLD Lincoln Martin Tom constantly scratches his severely burnt feet. He is visibly in pain.

Lincoln, from Hwange's Number 3, saw his life turn into a nightmare after he accidentally stepped on coal seam fires while walking home from church in Madumabisa village with his grandmother in September last year.

"It was around 5pm after church when they were coming home and Lincoln accidentally stepped on the fire," his mother Gloria Tom narrated.

"There was no sign that there could be fire beneath that ground. His feet were severely burnt and he is yet to recover from the burns.

Tom said her son was hospitalised for two months at the Hwange Colliery Hospital as doctors battled to treat his burns.

Doctors had to graft skin from his thighs to repair the severe damage on his feet, but the wounds are yet to heal.

"I suspect that the burns went deep beyond his skin because the wounds are taking too long to heal," she said.

The tragedy disrupted Lincoln's early childhood development education as he is still struggling to walk despite being discharged from hospital on November 9 last year.

His parents are struggling to pay his hospital bills and to buy medication because their sources of income are limited.

"We did not get help from Hwange Colliery Company Limited (HCCL) or anyone and I had challenges in footing the hospital bills and buying medication," she said.

"Whenever they could, my siblings used to assist with medication, but we have not been able to buy all the medication that he requires. It's painful to see my child in this condition because at times he wakes up in the middle of the night to scratch his feet, he will be in so much pain that my husband and I have to watch helplessly."

A number of children and even adults in Hwange can relate to young Lincoln's harrowing tale because a growing number of people are falling victim to the underground fires at the HCCL-owned coal mining concessions.

The coal seam fires have forced government to hire a German firm, DDT, to establish the causes of the fires and find a solution to the hazard.

According to Global Forest Watch, coal seam fires occur underground when a layer of coal in the earth's crust is ignited.

The fires are often hard to detect because they spread underground and are even harder to extinguish.

Scientists say the underground fires are burning hundreds of millions of tonnes of coal globally every year and are contributing to climate change and increasingly becoming a threat to human life as witnessed in Hwange.

Experts say the coal seam fires may be contributing more than 3% of the world's annual carbon dioxide emissions, which cause global warming.

Research by Stacher, which was published in the International Journal of Coal Geology, also says the fires release noxious chemicals into the air which condense to contaminate the soil and water with substances such as mercury, selenium and sulphides.

In Hwange, the underground fires are taking a toll on road infrastructure, with one major road now closed after it caved in, and they are also causing serious health complications for locals that accidentally step on them.

Scores of women and children are now nursing life-altering injuries like those inflicted on Lincoln.

Four-year-old Sihlobosenkosi Junior Nyoni from Madumabisa village was also severely burnt in the hands as he drove away a stray herd of cattle.

His distraught mother, Chipu Nyoni said the accident, which happened on September 2 last year, could have been avoided if the HCCL dumpsite at B Section was cordoned off.

Sihlobosenkosi, who was in the company of other children from the neighbourhood, was burnt while picking a stone close to the dumpsite.

"When we took him home, I was advised by others to apply a raw scrambled egg on his body to treat the burns," Nyoni said.



Chitando said the German firm, DDT, which was hired by HCCL to find a solution to the menace, would conclude its work next month.

“Afterwards, the government will ensure that serious action is taken to address the problem once and for all,” he said.

### ***Mines minister Winston Chitando***

But CNRG said lack of investment in recreational facilities by mining companies was one of the reasons that had resulted in children playing in dangerous zones, hence a need for more practical solutions and recreational infrastructure.

“In most mining regions in Zimbabwe, environmental laws are poorly implemented, resulting in creation of death traps for children who often find joy in playing with abandoned. Equipment, and chemicals or use open pits, sometime with toxic substances, as swimming pools,” the CNRG report read.

“It is, therefore, important for mining companies to put in place policies that protect and safeguard children from physical danger and dangerous sites must be properly secured to ensure children do not gain access. In places with underground fires such as Hwange, the company and the Environmental Management Agency have a duty to keep watch over these fires and warn the community accordingly.”

CNRG also recommended that companies that dig and leave open pits “must be heavily fined and banned from operating” as they posed risks to unsuspecting children.

It challenged the Health and Child Care ministry to carry out inspections on the safety and wellbeing of children in mining zones and make policy recommendations to government for tightening of laws to ensure children do not fall victim to mining hazards.

“The Department of Social Development should consider providing psychosocial support to all the victims and their families, including support for treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. The government and mining companies should capacitate local health centres to deal with victims of coal seam fire disasters. Government need to come up with rehabilitation programs for victims coal seam fire victims and also how to manage the coal seam fires.”

CNRG also added that government needed to align its progressive climate change response strategy and policy to practical reduction in coal activities in Hwange. Yet, for victims like Lincoln, the action might be a case of too little too late as they have to live with permanent scars and life-altering experiences.

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