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## The responsibility of feeding schoolchildren safely

Contributed by Bill Webb  
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Last week brought the news of children in the northern Indian state of Bihar being poisoned by their school lunches, resulting in the death of 23 and the treatment of even more who were hospitalized after eating.

This week, a similar tragedy occurred in a southwestern state of India, with 23 students in the state of Goa requiring treatment. All of the third- to fifth-graders at St. Joseph School have been released from treatment, according to local authorities.

Health officials determined that in the case of food poisoning in Bihar, involving students 5-12 years of age, the suspect poison was organophosphorus compound, a type of chemical that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says is commonly used in agriculture. It is a nerve agent related to sarin gas, which is used in chemical warfare.

Bihar state Education Director P.K. Shahi said an insecticide that was in the food poisoned the children. He said early reports suggested that when the cook questioned the quality of the oil used to prepare the food, the school's headmistress rebuked the cook, chastised the children and forced them to eat.

Authorities say they are still trying to get in contact with the headmistress, who disappeared shortly after the poisonings. They also are trying to determine whether the poisonings were accidental or intentional.

The second incident also was reported as food poisoning.

Safety has been an issue for school lunches in a nation where roughly half the children are classified as malnourished. Authorities questioned the safety of the Bihar school several months ago.

According to CNN, since a landmark Supreme Court decision in 2001, all government schools in India have been required to provide free meals to students younger than 13.

Bihar state has been working "to improve the quality and... try to get good food served," Shahi told CNN. "However, the challenge is still there because the magnitude of this program is so huge that there are a number of challenges." He said those challenges are at least partly financial.

Last week's headlines about 23 children dying shortly after ingesting the poisoned food was shocking, not only in Bihar state and the nation of India but throughout the world. We think of it as inexcusable that a government-initiated food program would allow such a thing to happen, even in a very rural part of what is generally regarded as a nation that has huge underdeveloped pockets and rampant poverty.

If such an atrocity occurred in the U.S., Americans would react with the same violent outrage as parents across India. The fact is that something like this could potentially happen anywhere.

Correcting this problem is an Indian issue today but it has worldwide ramifications. It requires not only national attention where it has most recently manifest itself, it needs global attention no less than a medical epidemic of some kind.

In every nation, our most important resource is people. We have no more precious resource in any society than the most vulnerable citizens &ndash; our children. They deserve protection.