

Chinese Plant Under Guard After Lead Poisoning

CHRISTOPHER BODEEN Associated Press Writer - August 19, 2009

CHANGQING, China (AP) — Dozens of police and plainclothes officers guarded a Chinese smelting plant in central Shaanxi province on Wednesday, days after hundreds of villagers stormed the factory because more than 600 children from two nearby villages had been sickened by lead poisoning.

The roads leading to the plant were lined with a heavy security presence. On one stretch, 75 to 100 officers patrolled the streets as small groups of parents gathered. However, when parents tried to talk to visiting journalists about their concerns over health, the security officers tried to break up the interviews.

At least 615 of 731 children in two villages near the Dongling Lead and Zinc Smelting Co. plant in Shaanxi province's Changqing town have tested positive for lead poisoning. Some had lead levels 10 times the level China considers safe.

At the nearby Fengxiang County Hospital, 80 children had been admitted as of Wednesday for observation and treatment of lead poisoning.

Zha Xiaofang, 41, from Madaokou village, said her 8-year-old daughter has lead levels considered mid- to high-level poisoning. Her daughter has had abdominal pain and memory problems for some time.

"We are anxious because we don't know what will happen next and we don't have any guarantees for the future," she said, standing just outside the children's ward where her daughter was being treated.

Children could be seen lying on hospital beds with their parents hovering nearby, many of them on IV drips.

Police and plainclothes officers in the hospital followed journalists around and tried to prevent them from conducting interviews.

The other village affected is Sunjianantou. Parents of a few hundred children were waiting for the results of tests Tuesday for lead poisoning in a third village, Luobosi.

On Monday, Dai Zhengshe, the mayor of Baoji city, which oversees Changqing, apologized to protesting villagers and said the smelting plant would not be allowed to open again until it met health standards, the official Xinhua News Agency reported.

Angry villagers had torn down fences and blocked traffic outside the factory, enraged by the plant's defiance of an Aug. 6 order to suspend operations, Xinhua

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said. Fighting between angry parents and scores of police broke out Sunday, and trucks delivering coal to the plant were stoned.

The mayor said the plant halted production only on Monday because of safety reasons.

"We had to make sure the gas in the pipeline was exhausted before the plant was finally shut down," Dai was quoted as saying.

Authorities have promised to relocate hundreds of families within two years, Xinhua said, but residents were not reassured.

"If they relocate us to these nearby places, who can guarantee that our babies will be safe?" said farmer Deng Xiaoyan, a resident of Sunjianantou. She said a recent test showed her 3-year-old daughter had high levels of lead.

Environmental problems have escalated as China's economy booms, sometimes prompting violent protests. Counting on lax enforcement of regulations, some companies find it easier and cheaper to dump poisons into rivers and the ground rather than dispose of them safely.

In Wenping township in central Hunan province, another 100 children have gotten lead poisoning, Southern Metropolis Daily reported Wednesday.

Angry villagers there had blocked the roads on July 30 after the government refused to close down a manganese processing plant. But last Thursday, the local government announced that the factory was operating illegally and had over-discharged lead so the government was shutting it down. Local officials offered free lead testing for all children under the age of 14 within three miles (five kilometers) of the factory.

Lead poisoning can damage the nervous and reproductive systems and cause high blood pressure, anemia and memory loss. It is especially harmful to young children, pregnant women and fetuses, with damage that is usually irreversible, according to the World Health Organization.

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