

# Second Lead Poisoning Case Hits China, 1,300 Sick

*Alexa Olesen THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - August 21, 2009* BEIJING — China has detained two factory officials after 1,300 children were poisoned by pollution from a manganese processing plant, days after emissions from a lead smelter in another province sickened hundreds.

Both cases have sparked unrest and come amid growing anger in China over public safety scandals in which children have been the main victims. Tainted infant formula milk and the mass collapse of schools in a huge earthquake last year have also provoked widespread dissent.

The latest incident involves the Wugang Manganese Smelting Plant in Wenping township, central Hunan province. It opened in May 2008 without the approval of the local environmental protection bureau, within 500 yards (meters) of a primary school, a middle school and a kindergarten.

Fears of poisoning began to spread among villagers in early July when many children became susceptible to colds and suffered fevers and other ailments, the official Xinhua News Agency said Thursday.

Some 1,354 children who live near the plant — or nearly 70 per cent of those tested — were found to have excessive lead in their blood, Xinhua said. Lead poisoning can damage the nervous and reproductive systems and cause high blood pressure and memory loss.

Local authorities shut down the smelter last week and detained two of its executives on suspicion of "causing severe environmental pollution," Xinhua said. General manager Liu Zhongwu was still at large, it said.

Li Liangmei, a 36-year-old mother of two affected children, said hundreds of villagers rioted Aug. 8 after news broke about the lead poisoning. She said a crowd of about 600 to 700 people overturned four police cars and smashed a local government sign.

"People were angry about the test results," Li said. Her 13-year-old daughter and 8-year-old son were among the hundreds found to have lead in their blood above safe levels.

Earlier this week, villagers in Shaanxi, another rural province in central China, clashed with police as they protested the operations of the Dongling Lead and Zinc Smelting Co. in the town of Changqing. They also stoned trucks trying to deliver coal to the plant.

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That unrest came after at least 615 out of 731 children in two villages near that smelter tested positive for lead poisoning. Children from six other villages there are now being tested.

Children's health can be a particularly volatile issue in China, where most families are restricted to having just one child.

A string of recent safety scandals has put parents on high alert, including a national problem with tainted infant formula that killed at least six babies, and the mass collapse of schools in last year's Sichuan earthquake that left thousands of students dead. Critics blamed poor government oversight for the milk, and local corruption and profit-skimming for the allegedly shoddy school buildings.

Seeking to restore public trust, the Communist Party leadership has vowed in each case to deal harshly with those responsible for endangering children. But heavy-handed efforts to silence angry parents, including threats and house arrest, have further damaged the party's image and undermined its pledge to "put people first."

Zhao Lianhai, the father of a child who was sickened by tainted milk, blamed local government greed for the new lead poisoning cases and expressed sympathy for the families affected.

"It is said that children are the flower of the motherland and I am sad to see these flowers devastated," he said in a telephone interview. "The government should value the children more than this, care for them and do more to protect their food and living conditions."

Since his son became ill, Zhao has turned to activism, seeking punishment for those implicated in the milk scandal and free medical care for victims. Some 294,000 infants suffered urinary problems from drinking the infant formula contaminated with the industrial chemical melamine.

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