China Executes Men Involved In Tainted Milk Scandal

Christopher Bodeen THE ASSOCIATED PRESS — November 24, 2009

BEIJING — China executed a dairy farmer and a milk salesman Tuesday, the only two people sentenced to death in a scheme to water down infant formula with an industrial chemical that left at least six children dead and sickened more than 300,000.

The contamination of the milk power with melamine was one of China's worst-ever food safety scandals, and Beijing is eager to prove it has responded swiftly and comprehensively to eliminate the problem — one in a string of food safety scares. When the scandal came to light in September 2008, there were accusations that the government had prevented the news from breaking until after the Olympic Games in Beijing ended.

Dairy farmers and the middlemen involved in the scam conspired to increase profits by watering down milk and milk products before they sold it, fooling inspectors testing for protein content by adding melamine — used in the manufacture of plastics and fertilizers. Melamine, like protein, is high in nitrogen.

Zhang Yujun, a farmer, was executed for endangering public safety, and Geng Jinping for producing and selling toxic food, according to the official Xinhua News Agency. They were the only defendants among 21 sentenced in January to have received the death penalty.

Much of the phoney protein powder that Zhang and Geng produced and sold ended up at the now-defunct Sanlu Group Co., at the time one of China's biggest dairies.

Xinhua said news of the execution had been issued by the Shijiazhuang Municipal Intermediate People's Court, although a court clerk who answered the phone Tuesday said he was unable to confirm the sentences had been carried out. Most executions in China are carried out by firing squad.

Of the others tried and sentenced in January in connection with the scandal, Sanlu's general manager, Tian Wenhua, was given a life sentence after pleading guilty to charges of producing and selling fake or substandard products.

Three other former Sanlu executives were given between five years and 15 years in prison.

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