China: Death for the Worst Food Safety Offenders

BEIJING (AP) — China warned Thursday that the worst offenders of food safety rules would get the death penalty in a new crackdown on an industry that has spawned embarrasing and deadly scandals in products ranging from seafood to baby formula.

Chinese authorities already have used capital punishment in some of the most egregious food safety violations, but appeared to be expressing their intention to become even more aggressive in prosecuting such cases.

China overhauled its food safety management system after a series of scandals that frightened consumers at home and abroad, including a problem two years ago with tainted baby formula that killed six children and sickened 300,000.

That scandal led to prison terms for dairy executives deemed responsible and a shake-up of the Chinese milk industry. Two people were executed.

But the problems have continued, with authorities in several cases this year again finding milk tainted with the industrial chemical melamine.

The official Xinhua News Agency cited a joint notice issued by the Public Security Bureau and three top law agencies as saying severe or large-scale food safety cases must be strictly punished.

"Those deserving death penalties should be resolutely sentenced to death," Xinhua quoted the notice as saying.

China executes more people each year than any other country and critics say the death penalty here is used to punish too many crimes and applied too often.

The government is debating revisions to the criminal code that would cut economy-related and non-violent offenses from the list of 68 crimes currently punishable by death. It's not clear if the proposed changes would affect punishments for food safety crimes.

Thursday's notice also promised harsher punishment for government officials who accept bribes and protect or ignore food safety offenders.

"Officials who are involved in food safety crimes should not be given a reprieve or be exempt from criminal punishment," Xinhua quoted the document as saying.

The notice didn't appear to announce changes to the food safety law but said courts should order the highest penalties allowed.

Other food safety problems have included seafood treated with cancer-causing antibiotics or antimicrobials, eggs colored with industrial dye, and fake liquor that can cause blindness or death.

The announcement was issued Wednesday by the Public Security Bureau, The Supreme Court, the Ministry of Justice and the Supreme People's Procuratorate, Xinhua said.

The court did not immediately respond to a faxed request for the original notice.

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