

Solar Company Pledges Toxic Waste Cleanup

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A solar panel maker targeted by violent protests over pollution from one of its factories in eastern China has apologized and says it will do what's necessary to clean it up.

Jinko Solar Holding Co., parent company of the factory in Haining city west of Shanghai, said in a statement Monday that initial tests showed pollutants may have spilled into a nearby river due to "improper storage of waste."

Police detained at least 20 people after hundreds of villagers protested last week, some storming the factory compound and overturning vehicles. Authorities said the factory had failed to address earlier environmental complaints and that the protests followed mass fish deaths in late August due to runoff from heavy rains.

Jinko Solar, whose shares are listed on the New York Stock Exchange, said the factory's production was suspended but would likely resume within a few days.

"The company will take all necessary steps to ensure that it is in compliance with all environmental rules and regulations. Any deficiencies in environmental protection uncovered will be immediately remedied," it said.

The Haining protests reflect the dirty side of clean energy. While use of solar power can reduce the need for burning heavily polluting coal and other fossil fuels, the process of producing photovoltaic cells uses various chemicals and materials that can also be toxic.

The protests in Haining were the latest increasingly bold public reactions to environmental concerns after three decades of laxly regulated industrialization.

Protests in rural areas and smaller cities are often quashed or ignored. But those in and near big cities like Shanghai appear to be having some influence on leaders who have pledged to deliver a more sustainable, healthy lifestyle along with job-creating growth.

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Last month, a protest by 12,000 residents in the northeastern port city of Dalian against a chemical plant drew a pledge by local officials to relocate the plant. Storm waves had breached a dike guarding the plant, raising fears flood waters could release toxic chemicals. A similar protest in 2007 in Xiamen was also successful.

In Shanghai, authorities suspended operations at one of the world's biggest lead-acid battery plants, run by U.S.-firm Johnson Controls Inc., after residents living in an industrial zone complained the lead levels in dozens of children were several times or more above the legal limit.

The company said it did not believe its factory was the cause of any unsafe lead emissions.

The city government reported Tuesday that seven of 17 lead-acid battery plants in the city of 23 million had been ordered to stop production due to excessive lead emissions.

Lead poisoning can hurt the nervous, muscular and reproductive systems. Children are particularly at risk to irreversible damage, even from low levels of exposure.

Officials said the city was expanding the tests to include more children.

Meanwhile, Shanghai's Jinshan District, site of a massive petrochemicals zone, said it had shut down 75 companies due to health risks from hazardous chemicals in a six-month safety campaign.

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