

Protests Force Chinese City to Scrap Copper Plant

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese city announced Tuesday it has scrapped plans for a copper plant after thousands of people protested the project's possible public health risks.

Shifang city in the southwestern province of Sichuan issued a statement on the Internet saying it had decided to stop the project.

The city's public security bureau earlier warned the public not to use the Internet or cellphones to organize more protests and asked those who had done so to turn themselves in within three days or face severe punishment.

Thousands of people — including high school students — concerned about pollution the plant would cause began to gather in front of the city government building and a public square Sunday night, and the protests turned bloody Monday afternoon after riot police moved in.

Public anger surged as Internet users circulated photos and videos of riot police using tear gas and batons to end the protests. Some Internet users said one protester had died.

"People are very upset. How could the police beat them?" said a 15-year-old middle school student surnamed Liu who did not join the protest.

A man who answered the phone at Shifang No. 2 Hospital said more than 30 people — including police officers and protesters — were injured but that they were discharged after minor treatment. The man, who declined to give his name, said no one had died.

The city government had earlier said it would delay the project after the protest and educate residents about it.

Liu said parents, classmates and teachers all objected to the project because of its environmental risks.

"It will make our home city a town of death," Liu said.

Pollution problems are a leading cause of unrest as China undergoes rapid economic development, and citizens have become more outspoken against environmentally risky projects in their backyards.

Protests often bring at least a temporary halt to such projects, particularly when they involve the urban middle class. But local officials who are under pressure to deliver economic growth often restart them once the outrage dies down.

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Last year, authorities swiftly closed and moved an urban chemical factory from Dalian in northeastern China when 12,000 people protested.

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