Chinese Dare Officials to Swim in Polluted Rivers

DIDI TANG,Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese businessman angry about a filthy river has come up with an equally dirty dare: He'll give an environmental official about $32,000 just for swimming in the polluted waterway.

Businessman Jin Zengmin posted on his microblog photos of a garbage-filled river in his hometown of Rui'an city in the eastern province of Zhejiang. He dared the local environmental protection chief, Bao Zhenming, to swim in it for a cash prize of 200,000 yuan.

The challenge, made Saturday, reflects growing frustration among the Chinese public over widespread pollution and lack of governmental action. It quickly inspired at least one other offer: A posting Tuesday under an alias on an online forum offered a 300,000 yuan ($48,000) cash prize to the environmental protection chief in the nearby county of Cangnan if the official swam in polluted rivers there.

Jin said on his microblog that a rubber shoe factory has been dumping wastewater into the river, and that the area had an exceptionally high cancer rate.

A Rui'an government official who would give only his surname, Chi, would not say Wednesday whether Bao would accept Jin's challenge. But Chi said the bureau had contacted Jin and will take some measures, including working with residents to clean up trash in the river and putting up signs warning against dumping.

"We will also step up efforts in controlling industrial pollution sources," Chi said.

He also said that the public should shoulder responsibility in protecting the environment, and that the environmental protection bureau welcomes public supervision and participation in cleaning up local rivers.

China's booming economy has brought more water pollution, some of it shockingly serious. High-profile industrial accidents along major rivers have disrupted water supplies to big cities in recent years.

Hu Siyi, vice minister of water resources, said last year that 20 percent of China's rivers were so polluted that their water quality was rated too toxic for human contact, and that up to 40 percent of the rivers were seriously polluted, according to state media.

Last month, about nine tons of aniline, a chemical used to make polyurethane, leaked into a river in northern China. It took five days for the leak to be reported, and by then it had contaminated the water supply of a city in a neighboring province.

Yang Jianhua, a researcher at the Zhejiang Academy of Social Sciences, told the state-run China News Service that the cash-prize challenges reflect the public's deep worries about pollution.

"The environmental agencies are obligated to make efforts and solve the problem," Yang told China News.

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