



China detains 74 linked to lead poisoning as crackdown widens

By Elaine Kurtenbach, The Associated Press – May 30, 2011

SHANGHAI — China has detained 74 people and suspended production at hundreds of battery factories in a widening crackdown on heavy metals pollution after dozens of people were sickened by lead and cadmium poisoning.

The government in eastern China's Zhejiang province said Monday that some of the people were detained in connection with pollution that sickened 172 people, including 53 children, near a battery factory in the city of Taizhou. Water and power to 652 factories was cut, it said in a statement on its website.

Local authorities are belatedly moving to curb pollution after Beijing announced plans for tighter oversight of the industry in response to reports of widespread contamination from heavy metals.

The manager of Taizhou Suqi Storage Battery Co. was arrested in late March and three government officials were suspended for neglecting to properly supervise the factory after tests found many living near the facility had high levels of lead in their blood.

The statement Monday said that investigation resulted in 74 people being detained in 56 cases that were handed to police for possible prosecution.

Lead poisoning can damage the nervous, muscular and reproductive systems. Children are particularly at risk.

The poisonings in Taizhou were among many in Zhejiang, a major battery production centre, and elsewhere in eastern and southern China that appear to have prompted the latest push for better local enforcement of laxly observed environmental standards.

"All remediation will be conducted according to strict discipline. Dismantling of illegal smelters and small, unauthorized electroplating workshops will be conducted strictly according to law," the statement cited Cai Xumin, a local official in charge of the Taizhou cleanup, as saying.

In Zhejiang's Deqing county, where 53 people were hospitalized after tests in late April found high lead levels in the blood of 332 residents near a factory making lead-acid motorcycle batteries, all three local factories were ordered to stop production, said county public outreach official Ji Huibin.

The crackdown is aimed at preventing and reducing contamination of the environment with toxins such as lead, cadmium, mercury, chromium and other heavy metals that have left much of China dangerously polluted.

Thousands of children were affected by lead poisoning in several provinces in 2009 and 2010 because they lived near metal smelters or battery factories. Combined with scandals over contaminated foods and milk, the issue has taken on urgency for government leaders who have promised to deliver more sustainable, people-oriented economic growth.

Manufacturers of lead-acid batteries are a key target. An explosion in the use of electric scooters and surging auto manufacturing have driven up demand for batteries, but mining, smelting, making and disposal of the lead and the batteries have been poorly regulated.

"It doesn't matter what the reason is, companies and local officials must take responsibility for failing to meet environmental standards," said a statement on the website of the Ministry of Environmental Protection. "These situations are completely avoidable."



Several major battery manufacturers with shares traded in China have issued notices saying their production was suspended amid a sweeping drive to clean up the industry.

Ultimately, the goal is to reduce the number of manufacturers to about 300 from the current 1,700, the financial newspaper China Business News said Monday.

The suspensions have driven up prices for batteries already on the market as scooter makers rush to secure supplies, while reducing demand for lead, it said.

Usually, people working in the industry greet each other with the question, "How's production these days?" said Huang He, sales manager for major battery maker Chongqing Wanli Holding (Group) Co.

"These days, I'm usually asked instead, 'Is your factory closed?'" Huang said.

Associated Press researcher Fu Ting contributed to this report.