

Third Case of Mass Lead Poisoning In China, 200 III

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BEIJING (AP) — Two hundred children are suffering from lead poisoning in southwest China, the country's third such case of mass sickening in the past month, an official newspaper said Monday.

Parents in Tongdu, a township in Yunnan province's capital of Kunming, blamed the poisoning on a nearby industrial park while local environmental officials attributed it to vehicle exhaust, the China Daily reported.

The Yunnan official overseeing the province's lead prevention office told The Associated Press that up to 60 percent of children under 14 are suffering from lead poisoning in areas of Yunnan with high mining activity — including Dongchuan, where the industrial park is located.

The Child Lead Prevention and Cure Office in Yunnan conducted the survey of random children last year, director Liu Dakun said. He declined to take further questions or say how excessive the levels were. He did not comment on this case.

An official with the Yunnan provincial environmental agency, however, told The Associated Press he was unclear of the situation, while calls to the Kunming environmental bureau Monday rang unanswered.

Earlier this month, more than 1,300 children in central Hunan province and at least 615 children in northern Shaanxi province tested positive for lead poisoning, which can damage the nervous and reproductive systems and cause high blood pressure and memory loss.

Those cases have been linked to metal processing plants near their homes and schools. Both plants have been shut down.

Anger is growing in China over public safety scandals in which children have been the main victims. The ruling Communist party is worried that mass protests will threaten the country's social stability and challenge its grip on power.

In the latest lead poisoning case, environmental officials in Tongdu said it was not linked to industrial pollution but to vehicle exhaust, the China Daily said. But the newspaper quoted parents as saying only children living near the industrial park were sickened.

Mining is one of the biggest industries in Yunnan, a mountainous region that is home to many of China's ethnic minorities and has large deposits of zinc, lead, tin and other metals, according to the provincial government's Web site.

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China's breakneck economic growth has caused serious environmental problems. For decades, many companies dumped poisons into rivers and the ground, counting on the acquiescence of local governments unwilling to damage their economic lifelines.

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