Official Suspended After Factory Sickens Hundreds Of Children

BEIJING (AP) — An environmental official in eastern China was suspended after a battery factory sickened more than 200 children with lead poisoning, authorities said Sunday.

China is the world's largest producer and consumer of lead, a key component in lead-acid batteries needed for the growing number of vehicles in the country. New cases of lead poisoning regularly occur, underscoring the toll pollution is taking on the health of rural Chinese.

Zhao Yiping, the head of the local environmental protection bureau in Huaining County in Anhui province, was suspended from his duties after tests confirmed that lead emissions from Borui Battery Co. Ltd. had polluted the nearby soil, the county government said in a statement.

It said 228 children out of 307 tested were found to have high levels of lead in their blood. Twenty-three of them were hospitalized and were receiving treatment. The battery plant was forced to halt operations while investigations continue, the statement said.

The plant had failed to pass necessary environmental checks and was asked to close in August, but it later resumed production without notifying authorities, the government said.

The factory was across the street from a residential area despite regulations that battery plants must be at least 1,600 feet (500 meters) away.

Cases of lead poisoning in China have sparked unrest and come amid growing anger 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 considers the protests a serious challenge to its grip on power.

Reports of lead poisoning have emerged from far-flung parts of China since 2009, usually rural areas where large, highly polluting factories have been plunked down among farms at the behest of local governments whose performance assessments are based on their ability to deliver economic growth.

Excessive amounts of lead in the body can harm the nervous and reproductive systems and cause high blood pressure and anemia. In severe cases, it can lead to convulsions, coma and death.

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