

Poisoned by cadmium Hunan villagers step up protests

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Contents

- [Neighbours of rogue chemical](#)
- [Poisoned by heavy metals \(...\)](#)
- [The benefits of capitalism](#)

Neighbours of rogue chemical plant realised too late it was going to kill them

By He Huifeng

The people of Shuangqiao in Hunan knew they had been deceived about the factory that went up near their homes five years ago. Those who went to work there found it was not processing animal feed, as villagers had been told, but chemicals.

Within a couple of years, they and their neighbours in surrounding villages began noticing strange things - a stench from their wells and an oily layer on the water's surface. The greens they grew in their fields wilted and the leaves were flecked; chickens and ducks died; children's growth was stunted and they became fidgety. Many villagers developed sore throats and their limbs ached.

Last year doctors found excessive lead in a boy of five, and villagers began to suspect the factory as the cause. But it was only three months ago that they understood the plant that had been spewing untreated waste from heavy-metals processing into their soil was killing them.

"In May, we suddenly realised we would be killed by this factory," Luo Jinzhi , 47, said. "But it is too late to stop it. Most families have one or two members who got poisoned.

"We are wondering who will be the next to die."

The same thought is haunting Ouyang Guoping as he watches his wife grow daily weaker. Both have cadmium poisoning, but her symptoms are more serious. He has already watched his older brother, Shuzhi, die.

In April Ouyang Shuzhi , who had worked part-time at the Xianghe Chemical factory, fell seriously ill. Within days, the once-robust farmer had developed dental ulcers, serious headaches and painful limbs. He was so ill doctors thought the 61-year-old had cancer.

"Doctors finally found an excessive amount of cadmium in his body on May 10. He died on May 28," Ouyang Guoping said.

He was not the first villager to die suddenly after his body became riddled with cadmium and indium - used to make batteries and liquid crystal displays respectively. Luo Bailin , 44, died a few days

earlier.

Three others have died in similar circumstances in and around Shuangqiao, villagers say, and officials say more than 500 have been poisoned. Villagers say thousands more need medical checks and believe the number poisoned is higher.

It did not take that long for villagers and doctors to link the deaths to the factory 300 metres from their homes. From the start of operations in 2004 the plant - now shuttered and deserted after the local government ordered it to close last month - had discharged waste water containing cadmium and indium residues into sewers and heaped untreated solid waste in the open air. Only recently was a shed built to hold this waste.

Since May, Shuangqiao's 4,000 residents have been living on food and water trucked in from elsewhere - after laboratory tests on soil samples showed its once-fertile fields would not be safe to farm for 60 years.

Villagers feel deceived. "The boss must have made a huge profit. He only paid us 18 yuan (HK\$20.40) a day and invested nothing in environmental-protection equipment," said Luo Shengqiao, 53, of Shuangqiao, one of 30 villagers hired to work at the plant. He said it produced tonnes of waste, which it discharged - at night - every four or five days.

Mr Luo said villagers had complained several times in the past three years to the government of Zhentou township, which administers the villages, but that officials had assured them there was no pollution problem.

Only after the deaths in May did the villagers realise that the fertile soil they had tilled for generations, the well their ancestors had drunk from, and they themselves were poisoned by heavy metals.

The plant is owned by a Hunan native. Last night his whereabouts were unknown.

On Wednesday villagers staged a protest for free medical checks and treatment, and compensation for their ruined land. Six were detained. The next day 1,000 besieged the local police station and government office to demand their release.

They are threatening another protest on Tuesday, when the government plans to stop paying daily compensation of up to 12 yuan. The local government did not return calls seeking comment.

Ouyang Guoping's wife, Zhang Shu'e, is among those pressing for more medical help.

"I think I'm dying, since my symptoms are similar to my brother-in-law's. I pleaded with the government to go to hospital *hellip* but they just gave me medicine and said I'm not sick enough," she said.

Cadmium dangers long known

This is not the first time people have been poisoned by cadmium. The problem was first documented in Japan's Toyama prefecture in the 1930s when people complained of spinal and joint pain.

Nor are the people of Zhentou the only ones in Hunan to have been poisoned by the heavy metal, which causes digestive and other problems. Three years ago at least eight people died of cadmium poisoning and more than 1,000 others were made ill in Majiahe, Zhuzhou.

Two years ago, nearly 100 workers at a plant in Wuxi, Jiangsu, making liquid crystal displays for Japanese electronics giant Panasonic suffered cadmium poisoning.

And in 2004, workers from two battery-making plant in Huizhou, Guangdong, took Hong Kong-listed Gold Peak Industries to court claiming they were among more than 100 poisoned by cadmium. The company denied they were poisoned, but paid compensation to more than 1,000 for cadmium-related illness.

Doctors say cadmium can damage the intestinal tract and cause cancer. (Minnie Chan)

Poisoned by heavy metals Hunan villagers step up protests

(AsiaNews/Agencies. 4 August 2009.)

Protests in villages around the city of Liuyang (Hunan) are spreading. Residents are up in arms against the high levels of heavy metal poisoning, including cadmium, found in the area near a chemical plant owned by Changsha Xianghe which discharged without any controls dangerous compounds into water that irrigate local fields. The authorities have appealed to residents to maintain order, but for many the case has become a litmus test for those in power.

The authorities announced on Saturday that they had suspended Chen Wenbo, head of Liuyang's environmental protection bureau, and his deputy. State news agency Xinhua also reported the detention of plant owner Luo Xiangping. The authorities also sent tens of officials to the three most affected villages to tell residents not to make any public protests, promising people they would get compensation as soon as possible and that their requests for free check-ups and treatment were being considered.

Despite threats of a crackdown residents have taken to the streets again to protest the metal poisoning that has killed at least five people and left hundreds sick, poisoning that is incurable and that has contaminated fields that can no longer be farmed, leaving local farmers without a means to earn a living. In fact the nearly 4,000 residents of Shuangqiao have been told they cannot farm their land for 60 years.

Residents have said they want concrete and immediate steps, including medical treatment and new land to farm. So far the government has given free checks only to the 2,888 people who lived within a 1.2-kilometre radius of the plant. Of these, 509 had cadmium and indium poisoning and 33 were hospitalised right away.

The pollution has been found beyond the immediate perimeter. The metals are carcinogenic and cadmium can damage the liver, kidneys, lungs, nervous system and brain.

The villagers began complaining three years ago about pollution from the factory, which started producing zinc sulphate in 2004.

The factory, which for years discharged waste water containing cadmium and indium and heaped untreated solid waste in the open air, was not closed until last month when the scandal broke.

The local government has been paying daily subsidies of 8 to 12 yuan (US\$ 1.1 to 1.7) to the 12,000

affected, but has said the payments would stop today.

Even then some residents said that no actual money has been transferred into their accounts. Hence, "What else can we do but protest?", said one.

The benefits of capitalism, but at an unbearable cost

Editorial, South China Morning Post

Unrestrained capitalism can be dangerous. In late-19th-century America, it resulted in contaminated foodstuffs, faulty consumer goods and pollution. If that sounds familiar, it is because an echo is to be found on the mainland today, with tainted-food scandals, hazardous consumer goods and environmental degradation.

The industrial poisoning in Hunan province, which this newspaper reports on today, is a striking example of the terrible toll pollution can take on people's lives. Five people have died and many more have been made ill by cadmium and indium poisoning, caused by effluent from a chemical factory. It is a terrible tragedy that should never have been allowed to happen.

Officials in Zhentou township, in Liuyang city, admit that more than 500 people have suffered potentially fatal poisoning after the plant discharged untreated waste into farmland soil for several years. But many more among a local population of 12,000 have health problems and more still have been exposed to danger. Villagers say that despite six detentions during a protest on Wednesday, they plan another on Tuesday if the authorities do not do more to help them. They say only one in four has been given a health check and only 60 have received free medical treatment. Daily compensation payments of up to 12 yuan (HK\$13.60) are due to end on Tuesday. Even if continued, that is of little solace to people who cannot farm their polluted land and may not be well enough to get a job, or live a normal life. More must be done for them.

Villagers say local government officials offered large sums of money to bereaved families to cover up the scandal. If true, this would call to mind an attempted cover-up of severe pollution of the Songhua River in 2005 after a chemical-factory explosion in Jilin province. Downstream in Harbin, officials who cut off the contaminated water supply claimed they were only doing it for maintenance work. Sadly, such incidents are only the tip of the iceberg. The mainland has many small factories similar to the one in Zhentou. The pursuit of wealth, the drive for development and the failings of local officials often combine to make life a misery for people living in the vicinity. Many officials still see environmental protection as an inconvenient obstacle to economic growth.

That said, the central government has made it clear it expects local cadres to strike a better balance between growth and sustainable development, cutting waste and reducing pollution. But the Zhentou scandal drives home the need for action to see that what happens on the ground reflects the central government's policy. As development spreads, the siting of factories has become a volatile issue, with the new urban middle class adding clout to protests.

The tragic consequences of the contamination of Zhentou's environment emerged only recently. The chemical plant has now closed, and many details of this affair remain unknown. Why was the factory built just metres away from houses and farmland? What environmental checks were carried out on

its operations? How was it able to release such dangerous chemicals into the environment?

That calls for a full inquiry. The central government must find out how this occurred and take steps to ensure that a similar tragedy cannot happen again. Those responsible must be caught and punished.

The suspension of an environmental official and his deputy is a start. But there is also a need to monitor the building and operation of chemical factories better, especially when they are so close to human habitation. Then, perhaps, the economic benefits of capitalism need not come at an unbearable cost.

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P.S.

* From Globalization Monitor website, <http://www.globalmon.org.hk/en>.