

The Chinese communist party (CCP) is well-known for either whitewashing scandals, or misrepresenting them, or even publicly declaring they do not exist, when evidence flies in the face of all their subterfuge. First came their denial of the SARS epidemic some years ago, then the horrid powdered milk scandal, with the huge embarrassment for the regime and the horror for the victims - and now lead poisonings.

At least two lead poisoning scandals have affected 2,000 children in China, the latest in a seemingly endless string of pollution scares exposing the dark side of the nation's economic boom. The actual numbers of victims might be considerably higher, but unless an independent investigation is permitted to assess the circumstances, the number 2,000 will have to stand.

Countless cities are smothered in smog while hundreds of millions of citizens lack access to unpolluted drinking water due to acid rain from factories that spew cancer-causing toxins and other pollutants into the air, water and soil, and thus into the food chain. Is food produced in China safe to eat?

村民纷纷起来抗议



As with all tragedies, there are individual human stories, such as this one:

Shanxi high school student Ma Jiaojiao, had learned of toxic lead levels in her system that could

not be cured. She attempted suicide by drinking a pesticide. She was hospitalized, but we don't know her fate. Hundreds of locals gathered at the Shanxi Dongling Smelting Company, pushed down one of the factory's walls and destroyed more than 10 delivery trucks.

Another example of such horror

Xiao Fengying had travelled seven hours by car two weeks ago with her two sick children aged six and 13 from their home in China's rural Hunan province to Changsha city for medical treatment. Both were suffering from suspected lead poisoning caused by a smelting plant near their village. Seventeen children from their area, aged 10 months to 14 years, are in hospital as doctors try to alleviate their suffering. Where this will end, no one knows.

Despite a slowly growing environmental consciousness in China, and health scares brought on by industrial mismanagement, greed and pollution and disregard for the environment, the regime is hell-bent to "produce, produce, produce," and never mind the fate of China's citizens, as long as there is money to be made. An environmental group speaker said that limited resources are available to monitor compliance with environmental protection orders; the equipment and manpower are insufficient, thus enabling the guilty enterprises to continue to pollute.

A recent BBC documentary accompanied a conscientious Chinese woman activist into the remote countryside, to show the reporter the now completely red river gliding sluggishly past a factory. Dead fish lay belly up along the shore. She told how the river a few years ago flowed briskly and was crystal clear. Two plants, one each in Hunan and Shaanxi province have been closed.

While such scenarios grab headlines, the true extent of such scandals remains unknown, due to the CCP's barring any correct information, for fear it would undermine its powers. It is quite likely that more information of this widening scandal will be forthcoming.

Though China has statutes in place, including a six-year-old regulation requiring environmental impact assessments and public participation before new industrial projects are approved; reports circulate regularly that local governments often scoff at these or are open to huge bribes to look the other way. And those who have the courage to expose gross violations, often end up imprisoned or even sentenced to death for 'disturbing the social order'.