

AI Index: PRE 01/369/2010
10 November 2010

China milk scandal activist sentencing condemned

Amnesty International today condemned the two-and-a-half-year sentence given to a Chinese activist who organized a support group for parents of babies made ill by tainted milk.

Daxing District People's Court in Beijing Municipality convicted and sentenced Zhao Lianhai today, seven months after his trial for "disturbing social order" during public outrage over the Sanlu Group milk powder scandal of 2008 and 2009. The melamine-tainted milk killed at least six children in China, and afflicted more than 300,000 others with kidney ailments.

"We are appalled that the authorities have imprisoned a man the Chinese public rightly view as a protector of children, not a criminal," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific.

Sanlu Group was revealed in 2008 to have sold milk powder containing the toxic industrial chemical melamine which had been added in order to pass official tests for protein level standards.

Zhao Lianhai's own young son was sickened by the milk, and Zhao founded the support group and website, 'Kidney Stone Babies,' so that parents could share information on health problems and exchange advice on how to sue the companies involved.

"Zhao Lianhai should never have been arrested for organizing a self-help group and exercising his legal rights to seek compensation from a commercial firm" said Catherine Baber.

Zhao was arrested as compensation claims began going to court in November 2009. Authorities denied him access to lawyers for nearly three months and barred him from meeting with his family.

The Chinese authorities also executed a farmer and a milk salesperson and imprisoned several high-ranking managers of the Sanlu Group. The authorities offered affected families compensation of RMB 2,000 (US\$300) for each baby who suffered kidney stones, up to RMB 30,000 (US\$4,500) for serious cases and RMB 200,000 (US\$30,000) for each death.

Authorities seized over 25,000 tonnes of the contaminated milk powder in 2008. Earlier this year in Qinghai province, food safety authorities discovered 64 more tonnes of melamine-tainted milk products.

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