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# China defends detention of lead poisoning victims who sought medical help

More than 50 villagers suffering from lead poisoning were detained after the bus taking them for health checks was stopped by police

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**Jonathan Watts**, Asia environment correspondent  
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Children at a village near the Wugang manganese smelting plant in Hunan province on 22 August, 2009. Hundreds of children in the province are suffering from suspected lead poisoning caused by the local factory.

Photograph: Frederic J. Brown/AFP

Chinese authorities have defended the six-month detention of lead poisoning victims who were seeking medical care, saying the punishment was necessary for "public education".

Police in Jiahe, Hunan province, blocked a bus carrying 53 villagers who were on their way to get health checks last September, according to Chinese media.

Mistakenly believing the villagers were planning to protest, the police have detained two of them for the six months since on the charge of "disrupting traffic". Though it has since been proved that they and their children were contaminated by illegal emissions of heavy metals from a smelting factory, the local government was unapologetic.

"We may have blocked the wrong visit, but they should not have been on that road," Li Ying, deputy secretary of Jiahe county political and legislative committee told the Beijing News, which today published an investigation into the incident.

Ou Shudong, the chairman of the local People's Congress, told the newspaper the police roadblock and detentions were justified. "The villagers' intentions were unclear. Even if they were going for a medical examination, they should have informed the government."

The story highlights the feudal control that local officials exercise in much of rural [China](#). It also exemplifies the widespread strategy of stifling dissent by making an example of suspected ringleaders, a tactic known as "killing a chicken to scare the monkeys".

A Jiahe county report cited by the newspaper says the punishment of a few people "served the purpose of public education for the majority". The Guardian's calls to the county government, police bureau and communist party went unanswered.

The journalistic exposure of police tactics came amid a widening wave of heavy metal scandals. Since the [first cases last summer](#), more than 3,000 children nationwide have been found to have unsafe levels of lead in their blood, forcing the closure of dozens of factories.

According to the environment ministry, [12 heavy metal pollutions incident were reported](#) last year, prompting 32 public disturbances.

Amid widespread unease that the full scale of the problem has yet to emerge, the authorities face a growing environmental and public security challenge.

The factory in Jiahe was operated by Tenda Corporation, a company that had been ejected from other, wealthier areas because of its dire [pollution](#) record. Jiahe – one of China's poorest counties – allowed it to operate despite warnings from the local environmental department that the plant was breaking toxic emission regulations.

A gradual build-up of lead in the bloodstream can damage the nervous system and lead to anaemia, muscle weakness, arrested development and brain damage.

Local people complained of health problems and unusually belligerent behaviour and poor school grades among their children, but their petitions to the authorities were ignored for more than three years.

However, medical tests have proved their claims. The latest results, received on 24 February, revealed that 250 of the 397 children in the village had excess levels of lead in their blood. The victims included four of the five children of Liao Mingxiu, one of those still in police detention.

More lead poisoning cases are emerging elsewhere. This week, 88 children and six adults tested positive for lead poisoning in Longchang county, Sichuan province.

Seven children have been hospitalised for a week and more than 700 people are awaiting medical test results.

The source of the contamination, the Zhongyi Alloy factory, has since been closed.

"We have sent 10 doctors to the villages to explain the situation to residents," said Zheng Shili, propaganda director of Longchang government. "Public sentiment is basically calm."

*Additional reporting by Han Ying*

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Known lead pollution cases

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### **Since August 2009**

[Jiahe county, Hunan province, 250 children affected](#)

[Fengxiang county, Shaanxi province, 615 children](#)

[Wugang city, Hunan province, 1,345 children](#)

[Dongchuan district of Kunming city, Yunnan province, over 200 children](#)

### **October 2009**

[Jiyuan city, Henan province 1,008 children](#)

### **Dec 2009**

[Longtang town, Qingyuan city, Guangdong province, 44 children affected](#)

### **Jan 2010**

[Longchang county, Sichuan province, 81 children](#)