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Death Sentences in Chinese Milk Case

By [DAVID BARBOZA](#)

BEIJING — Chinese courts sentenced two men to death on Thursday for endangering public safety in a tainted-milk scandal that killed at least six children, according to state-run news media.

Three other defendants, including a top dairy company executive, were sentenced to life in prison. Another defendant received a suspended death sentence, and 15 others were given prison terms from 2 to 15 years.

The sentences were the first to be handed down in one of the worst [food safety](#) scandals in [China](#) in decades. The scandals erupted in September, prompting a global recall of Chinese-made dairy products, shaking consumer confidence and devastating the nation's dairy industry.

Some lawyers and victims have accused Beijing of failing to regulate the nation's dairy industry properly. Some critics believe that the government covered up the scandal until after the Olympic Games in Beijing in August.

The Intermediate People's Court in Shijiazhuang, in the northern province of Hebei, said the defendants had intentionally produced or sold dairy products laced with a toxic chemical called [melamine](#), which was used to create the illusion of a higher protein count, but which caused [kidney stones](#) and other ailments in about 300,000 children last year.

Zhang Yujun, whom the government called one of the "principal criminals" in the scandal, was sentenced to death. He was convicted of selling 600 tons of melamine-tainted "protein powder" to dairy companies.

Another dairy producer, Geng Jinpin, also received the death penalty. A third man, Gao Junjie, received the death penalty with a two-year reprieve, meaning he could be spared execution.

Tian Wenhua, 66, the former chairwoman of the Sanlu Group, one of China's largest dairy companies, was sentenced to life in prison for her failure to stop producing and selling the tainted goods even after her company learned they were flawed.

Ms. Tian is the highest-ranking corporate executive to have been brought to trial in the scandal. She pleaded guilty in December and was also fined about \$3 million. All the deaths in the scandal so far have been linked to Sanlu, which was found to have sold the milk products with the highest melamine concentrations.

"The sentence against Tian Wenhua is too harsh," Liu Xinwei, Ms. Tian's defense lawyer, said after the verdict, adding, "I don't agree her criminal circumstances were that grave and serious involving this case."

Three other former executives at Sanlu were sentenced to 5 to 15 years in prison. One of them, Wang Yuliang,

appeared in court in December in a wheelchair after what the Chinese state-run news media said was a failed [suicide](#) attempt. He received a 15-year sentence. Two other men who sold tainted protein powder, Zhang Yanzhang and Xue Jianzhong, were sentenced to prison for life, the state-run news agency, Xinhua, reported.

Parents of some victims protested outside the courthouse in Shijiazhuang, where Sanlu is based, saying they were dissatisfied with the verdicts. "I feel sorry for them, but they are just scapegoats," said Liu Donglin, 28, who said his 21-month-old son had kidney stones after drinking tainted milk formula. "The ones who should take the responsibility are the government."

Chen Yang contributed research from Shanghai, and Xie Qing from Beijing.

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