

Daniel Gallington: A very dirty story on China's food

Daniel Gallington, The Examiner
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WASHINGTON -

"I don't eat them myself" are the wise words of a Beijing baker quoted recently in an Associated Press story about the pervasiveness of adulterated foods in China. In his case, his rolls are half-filled with filthy scrap cardboard gathered from the ground.

Such practices are so widespread that the recent episodes of tainted seafood, toothpaste, pet food — and now millions of lead-base painted toys — all from China, shouldn't surprise anyone.

Nevertheless, most Americans don't have a clue about the sanitary conditions or lack of them in many developing areas of Asia and the Far East.

In China, India and Pakistan, especially in the rural, industrial and factory regions, there are no sewage systems to speak of — raw human sewage runs in the streets or in ditches alongside, where it leaches into the ground and pollutes every phase of the plant-growing cycle and all other aspects of human life.

All kinds of wastes are simply thrown on the ground; industrial and factory waste is dumped wherever it can be poured, piled or scattered. The rivers and streams are "dead" and run a putrid orange, their surfaces coated with poisonous slicks and toxins of all kinds.

Rats are everywhere. Safe drinking water is hard to find, and even if it's bottled and sealed with assurances of purity, it is often made unfit for human consumption by someone making easy money.

Some of the pollution is so awful that it's hard to imagine: The huge stinking mountains of garbage in and around Manila are simply beyond belief; some are 25 square acres and 400 feet high!

Filth-coated children pick through the smoking mess with long poles, looking for things to sell. In 2000, more than 200 so-called "squatters" (people who live on and in the garbage) — many of them children — were buried alive in an "avalanche of filth."

According to another recent AP story, Food and Drug Administration officials in May "stopped shipments [from China] of frozen crab meat found to be filthy, as well as roasted eel laced with unsafe additives, tilapia fillets tainted by salmonella and an unidentified fish mislabeled as catfish."

The Wall Street Journal reports that polluted dust containing "sulfates, smog, industrial fumes, carbon grit and nitrates" from China and Asia regularly accounts for a third of the air over the West Coast of the U.S.

Yet these are the countries often most critical of our environmental policies: As an example of the twisted politics involved, China has retaliated by destroying recent shipments from the U.S. for so-called "health and safety reasons."

Last week, the Chinese embassy here warned against “groundless smear tactics” concerning their products and protested that it was “unfair and irresponsible for the U.S. media to single out China ... and mislead the U.S. consumer.”

At home, Chinese government officials proudly announced that the safety of their products was “guaranteed” — this in weak response to ever-widening international concerns about their basic product health and safety. In addition — and as usual in China when the government is embarrassed — they summarily tried and executed their senior official in charge of food product safety.

A far more important lesson is that the international environmental politics of these countries should always be taken in context of the contaminated conditions there — including the international politics of global warming, pollution and greenhouse gasses.

Furthermore, absolutely nothing said or written by these countries critical of any aspect of the world environment should be regarded seriously by anyone, anywhere — especially our own government.

And, we should have a far more aggressive consumer protection policies targeted towards specific regions of the world where the human environment is particularly polluted. The basic — and not so diplomatic — message to them should be:

“Forget about chiding us — get serious about your own pollution — people in your country live in the environmental equivalent of a cesspool!”

Meantime, remember the wisdom of the Beijing baker who makes cardboard rolls: If it says “China” anywhere on it, don’t even think about eating it!

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