

THE CASE OF SUN XIAODI

BY REN CHONG

A mine employee who protested radioactive contamination learned first-hand the risks of environmental activism in China.

Sun Xiaodi disappeared early last year after petitioning the central authorities over contamination from the No. 792 Uranium Mine in Diebu County, Gansu Province. He was finally released from Lanzhou Prison on December 27, 2005, but his freedom of movement remains greatly restricted under residential surveillance. Sun Xiaodi is not permitted to leave his home without authorization or talk to the press, and when he is allowed out, he is kept under close police surveillance.

Previously employed as a warehouse manager at Mine No. 792, Sun was simply exercising his rights as a Chinese citizen by petitioning Beijing over corruption among the leaders of his work unit and legal infractions that resulted in serious radioactive contamination in the vicinity of the mine. Why should the authorities treat Sun as an enemy of the state? The reason lies in the fact that he worked at a mine engaged in uranium production, and the contamination and corruption he uncovered fit under the rubric of “state secrets,” knowledge of which is denied to ordinary people.

The No. 792 Mine where Sun worked is located in Gansu’s Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, one of China’s most important bases for uranium. Originally operated by the State Nuclear Industry Department, the mine opened for production on May 31, 1967 as a large-scale enterprise with installations that included a mine, a hydrometallurgy facility, its own medium-size hydroelectric power plant and a hospital. The mine produced 120 to 180 tons of enriched uranium-131 annually; some 90 tons was allocated for military use, but the disposition of the remaining uranium is unknown.

The state closed the mine in 2002, allocating 2.7 hundred million yuan in compensation funds for employees. However, each person actually received only 12,000 yuan in relocation expenses; the rest of the money remains unaccounted for. After risking their health in the radioactive environment of the mine, the employees were simply told to move away. Having nowhere to go, more than 800 stayed on in their old homes near the abandoned mine, even after the local government cut off water and electricity and sent police and the fire

department to drive them out with high pressure water hoses.

The Gansu No. 792 Uranium Mine was closed “as a matter of policy” on the basis of the “Notice concerning further operational improvements in regard to exhausted resources and obsolete equipment,” issued jointly by the State Defense Committee, the Central Military Committee, the State Council and the General Office of the CPC Central Committee in November 2002. According to former mine employees, No. 792 was still rich in uranium; there were four segments in the mine, and only a third of the uranium in one segment had been extracted.

According to mine employees, not only did production continue following the official closure notice, but the pit was extended by another 50 meters. The employees say that mine leaders colluded with officials at the provincial, department, bureau and prefectural levels to falsely report the mine as “exhausted,” then continued secretly extracting uranium from the “abandoned” mine using migrant laborers, selling the enriched uranium illegally at high prices overseas. Mine leaders said production was continuing in order to fulfill previ-



Sun Xiaodi (back left) with other former mine employees petitioning Beijing over corruption and pollution at the mine. Photo courtesy of Peacehall.

ously agreed international contracts, but press reports quote a source in the Nuclear Industry Department as saying that mine management, lured by the rich profits to be made on the international uranium market, planned all along to replace local workers with specialized technical workers and laborers brought in from Lantian County, Shaanxi Province, and to continue working the mine.

Based on facts brought to light by Sun Xiaodi, Mine No. 792 violated the state “radioactive substances management regulation” by selling off nearly ten million tons of highly radioactive equipment and materials nationwide. According to the provisions of the regulation, contaminated equipment such as that used by Mine No. 792 was not to be resold, but rather should be encased in lead and covered in concrete to a thickness of fifty centimeters. This concrete layer should then be covered with two to three meters of earth and planted with foliage. However, Sun Xiaodi reported that highly radioactive equipment and waste iron products from Mine No. 792 were sold in Gansu, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Zhejiang, Hunan and Hubei from 1994 to the end of 2003, with no precaution other than simple rinsing. Used in further production or melted down and refined, this equipment would continue to spread contamination. Cement and reinforced concrete produced with the ball mill and crusher bought from the mine by a cement factory in Inner Mongolia would create radioactive residences.

“These officials have blood on their hands,” Sun Xiaodi said. Officials suspected of selling off contaminated mine and hydrometallurgy factory equipment and material include the provincial Mining and Metallurgy Bureau section chief, the mine director, the mine deputy director, the mine Party secretary and many middle and lower ranking cadres.

Apart from the contamination spread by selling off equipment, Mine No. 792 also created a great deal of contamination during the production process. Sun Xiaodi said that when the mine opened, its uranium refinement process contravened state nuclear production safety regulations by discharging untreated contaminated water directly into the Baishui River, a main tributary of the Yangtze. Slag was also deposited on the banks of the nearby Bailong River, and during the flood season tons of uranium ore washed into the river and flowed on into the Yangtze. Sun also said that trucks hauled ore over a fifty kilometer road between the mine and the hydrometallurgy plant, spreading radioactive dust the entire way. Tibetan villagers often hitched rides on the trucks, sitting on top of the ore. The radiation level in shops and banks along the roadways is dozens of times higher than normal.

This area was once a place of green fields and clear waters, its woodlands filled with every kind of bird. Now radioactive contamination of the air and water has caused plants and trees to wither; the land is undergoing desertification, and large numbers of oxen and sheep have died. The mine has also caused terrible illnesses to proliferate among the area’s human residents, and more than half of local deaths are attributable to leukemia, liver cancer, skin cancer or some other form of cancer.

Up to the present, Mine No. 792 continues to employ



Photo of Mine No. 792 supplied to the Peacehall Web site.

migrant laborers who work the mine without adequate safety and prevention measures. Workers eat and sleep at the foot of the mine, and after work, they dive into their meals without showering or even washing their hands. Obsessed with personal profit, the provincial Mining and Metallurgy Bureau and corrupt officials at every level have never given a thought to whether the workers lived or died. They purchase no safety equipment, nor do they allow staff to inform the migrant laborers of the extreme dangers of uranium mining. They evade responsibility by rotating the labor force each year, and if migrant workers developed lung cancer or leukemia somewhere down the line, it is none of their affair.

One local mine employee, Mr. Ding, observed, “The laborers have no understanding of health protection or prevention. Those kids sit on the uranium ore to smoke and eat their steamed buns, and at night they even set up their cots inside and sleep in the uranium caves. I’ve told them that stuff could give people lung cancer, but they don’t understand any of it.”

The provincial Mining and Metallurgy Bureau and the leaders of Mine No. 792 have retaliated with every kind of tactic against staff who dare to expose the situation to higher authorities. Sun Xiaodi began reporting the illegal resale of contaminated equipment, illegal mining and careless disposal of untreated water in 1988. Over the years, he made repeated visits to provincial and central government officials reporting these infractions. But senior officials considered him a nuisance, and Sun’s complaints had no result other than his dismissal in 1994. His wife was assigned to heavy manual labor that ruined her health, and her wages and bonuses were frequently docked without reason. In 1994, mine officials forced her out of her job, leaving her with only a living allowance of 100 yuan per month. Their daughter, Sun Haiyan, suffered discrimination and beatings in school, and the family’s home was vandalized.

Nevertheless, in April 2005, Sun Xiaodi was back in Beijing petitioning the government. At 6 p.m. on April 28, after giving an interview to an Agence France Presse reporter, he was returning by bicycle to the “Petitioners’ Village,” a squatter area near Beijing’s southern train station. Near the overpass at the southern corner of Taoranting Park, Sun was intercepted by two men in civilian clothes who emerged from an unmarked car parked along the roadside; at the same time,



Photo of blighted land around the mine supplied to the Peacehall Web site.

several men jumped out of another car, and Sun was bundled inside and taken away. Many people witnessed the incident, and news of Sun's abduction spread quickly throughout the Petitioners' Village.

For several months, nothing more was heard of Sun. Police searched the Beijing home of a friend of Sun's on April 29, then took the friend to a State Security Bureau office and said that Sun was a "wanted criminal" who had committed a "very serious crime related to state secrets." Police also produced Sun's cellular phone, wallet, telephone diary and other personal belongings, as well as a document purportedly written by Sun, in which he acknowledged being detained and made certain representations. State Security Police told this same friend on June 20 that following investigations by Gansu authorities, Sun Xiaodi had been escorted back to Gansu. However, Sun's family had still seen no sign of him, and whenever Sun's daughter inquired into her father's whereabouts, Beijing authorities claimed complete ignorance.

In early September more than 150 people, including Sun's family, friends and former colleagues, signed a petition calling for his release. The petition was addressed to President Hu Jintao as he prepared to attend the 60th session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York later that month.

Finally, after more than eight months in custody, Sun was released in December and allowed to return home. His daughter told reporters that in the preceding eight months Sun had been transferred from place to place, and was never sure where he actually was. He remains under suspicion of "leaking state secrets," and could be arrested again at any time if he contravenes the terms of his residential surveillance, which include prohibitions against leaving his residence without permission and against "destroying or fabricating evidence or colluding in testimony." The document stipulates that the period of residential surveillance began on September 20, 2005, but gives no date of termination.

Translated by a friend of HRIC

This article was compiled from information gathered by HRIC, and from articles published on the Web sites of Peacehall, Radio Free Asia and *The Epoch Times*, in particular:

<http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/china/2005/09/200509080839.shtml>

<http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/china/2004/08/200408062214.shtml>

<http://www.dajiyuan.com/b5/6/1/22/n1199116.htm>.