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Food Poisoning Case In Sakhalin 'Criminal'

By Scott Rose

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The country's top sanitary doctor said Friday that he was seeking criminal charges against a firm providing food services at the ExxonMobil-led Sakhalin-1 oil and gas project after 70 people suffered mild to moderate food poisoning.

The Federal Consumer Protection Service's branch in Sakhalin said 70 cases of intestinal infection were registered from Tuesday to Thursday, including three "moderate" illnesses that required hospitalization.

Food poisoning cases are extremely common in Russia and often hit poorly funded summer camps, schools and other state institutions.

Gennady Onishchenko, the consumer protection service's director, told a Moscow news conference that the ill workers in Sakhalin included 49 Russians and three Americans.

"Trampling all of Russia's legal norms, the firm continues to play food roulette," Onishchenko said, Prime-Tass reported.

The same company — which he identified only as a "firm from Houston" — was responsible for 20 cases of food poisoning in June and an outbreak that sickened 60 people last year.

"I've given the order to hold the firm criminally responsible for trampling Russian law on public nutrition," Onishchenko said, without elaborating.

Russian-registered Remote Project Services Group Global is responsible for running the Sakhalin-1 cafeteria, which was designed to feed up to 600 people, Interfax reported, citing the watchdog's local branch. The company has been serving as many as 1,400 people, it said.

The press service for Exxon Neftegas, the operator of Sakhalin-1, confirmed the illnesses to Interfax but said the company had not yet found any link to the cafeteria's heavy workload.

Exxon Neftegas is 30 percent owned by ExxonMobil, based in Irving, Texas, while state-run Rosneft owns 20 percent. Japan's Sodeco owns 30 percent, and India's ONGC has the remaining 20 percent.

The consortium, which is operating under a production-sharing agreement, is developing an estimated 307 million tons of oil and 485 billion cubic meters of gas. Exxon wants to sell Sakhalin-1's gas to China, arguing that the PSA exempts it from Gazprom's export monopoly.

State-run Gazprom opposes the plan.

The partners have also clashed with the government over the project's budget, since the state only gets a share of production after the operator recoups its expenses. Exxon Neftegas sought a 2010 budget of $3.5 billion, but the state has so far only agreed to $1 billion.

In late June, Sakhalin Governor Alexander Khoroshavin said the state could seek to replace the Sakhalin-1 as operator.

Separately, at least three mass food poisonings have been reported in Russia since Friday, including nearly 30 people hospitalized after a wedding in the republic of Chuvashia and another 20 in Volgograd who fell ill after eating at a local cafe.

In last week's most prominent public health scare, the consumer protection service in Omsk was forced to track down anthrax-infected pelmeni produced by the firm Darina, which had purchased contaminated horse meat for its "Russian" and "Special" meat dumpling varieties.

One worker at an Omsk horse-slaughtering facility died from anthrax, while more than 120 were put under medical observation.

Onishchenko said Wednesday that all shipments of the tainted pelmeni sent to Moscow had been confiscated, while Omsk officials recommended that consumers return their Darina pelmeni to grocers for a full refund.

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