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Japan food probe widens as 1,400 reportedly fall sick

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A probe into pesticide-laced frozen food in Japan has widened, with police interviewing factory workers assigned to a packaging room, reports said Thursday, as the number who have fallen sick reportedly topped 1,400.

The country's consumer affairs minister has condemned the manufacturer of the tainted items, a subsidiary of Maruha Nichiro Holdings, Japan's largest seafood firm, saying they were slow to bring the matter to public attention.

At least 1,400 people nationwide have complained of illness—most displaying mild symptoms of vomiting, cramps and diarrhoea—after eating the suspect products, according to the latest tally compiled by Kyodo News and issued Wednesday.

The company, called Aqlifoods, received the first of a series of complaints on November 13, with a customer saying its frozen pizza smelled like machine oil.

But the firm did not announce a product recall until December 29, after tests found traces of a chemical called malathion, which is used as a pesticide and to treat head lice.

"For so long, information was withheld. The government cannot take action without reports from businesses," Consumer Affairs Minister Masako Mori told Aqlifoods president Yutaka Tanabe in their meeting

Wednesday.

The health ministry had acknowledged 1,047 cases of food poisoning from the tainted food as of Wednesday, but local public health centres and Aqlifoods continued to receive reports of possible incidents.

Investigators suspect that the toxin might have been deliberately added during production at a factory in Gunma, north of Tokyo, according to local press.

Police have started to interview workers there, with a particular focus on the 81 people who were assigned to the packaging room, where various frozen foods are dealt with, the daily Asahi said on Thursday.

But some operatives have cast doubt on the idea that this was the source of contamination, pointing out that they work close to one another and their uniforms do not have pockets, making it difficult for them to hide the use of a smelly chemical, the paper said.

Food safety standards are generally high in Japan, and companies that fall short of public expectations often find the reputational damage lasts for years.

Aqlifoods has recalled 6.4 million potentially tainted products, with 1.8 million packages recovered by Tuesday. None of the products in question had been shipped overseas, the company said.

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