

Embattled French dairy chief breaks silence over salmonella scare

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Lactalis has recalled over 12 million packages of baby formula in 83 countries over salmonella fears

The chief executive of France's Lactalis group on Sunday vowed compensation for victims of salmonella-tainted baby milk, as he revealed

that recalls were now under way in 83 countries.

Emmanuel Besnier, giving his first interview in nearly 20 years as head of the family-controlled company, told the Journal du Dimanche newspaper that the recall involved more than 12 million packages of Picot, Milumel, Celia and other brands of powdered baby [milk](#).

"We are going to draw the lessons from this crisis and set out an even stricter hygiene framework, in collaboration with the authorities," he said.

Asked why he had not publicly addressed parents' concerns as worries about the outbreak intensified, Besnier said: "It's true, by nature I'm not very forthcoming."

"In a crisis like this, we act first, and perhaps I didn't take the necessary time to explain things."

A total of 37 babies have fallen ill in France as a result of the contamination, health authorities said late Friday, along with a case in Spain and a suspected case in Greece, but Besnier said no new cases had been reported since December 8, a week after the recall was announced.

The French government welcomed the pledge to reimburse victims, but said investigations would continue to determine why the contamination went undetected.

Officials will also investigate why in some cases the affected milk continued to be distributed in supermarkets, pharmacies and even some hospitals after the recall was announced.

"Compensation is good, but money can't buy everything," government spokesman Benjamin Griveaux told BFM television Sunday.



So far, a total of 37 babies have fallen ill in France after consuming Lactalis baby formula or other infant products

"When you have a case of milk on the market which has clearly caused complicated health problems for children, it means at some point there was negligence," Griveaux said.

Besnier's explanations "at this point" have not been sufficient, he added, vowing that the investigations "will not spare anyone", including the French state.

'Not hiding things'

Besnier's interview included two of the first public photographs of the secretive leader in years, at the Lactalis headquarters in Laval, western France.

It came after French finance minister Bruno Le Maire summoned Besnier to a meeting over the crisis Friday, in which the [chief executive](#) agreed to pull from store and pharmacy shelves all products from the Craon factory where the outbreak was found, instead of just those dating back to February.

But Besnier did not appear with Le Maire at a press conference after the meeting, despite calls by several government officials for him to face the public.

Hundreds of lawsuits have been filed against the group by families who say their children got salmonella poisoning after drinking [powdered milk](#) made by the company.

Richard Ferrand, leader of President Emmanuel Macron's LREM lawmakers in parliament, said all efforts would be made to find the causes of the crisis, and did not rule out the creation of a parliamentary inquiry, sought by opposition groups.

But Besnier, 47, denied claims by an association of victims' families that Lactalis had lied about the dates and number of stocks affected by the salmonella outbreak.



The French government said there had been a "major malfunction" in the way Lactalis handled the recall

"This is false. I don't know what this claim is based on," he said.

"At no point was there any intention of hiding things."

Harsh spotlight

Besnier also defended the decision not to inform the authorities that internal tests had discovered salmonella on a broom and on the tiles of a dehydration tower at the company's Craon factory in August and November last year.

"For us, these 'environment' tests are an alert to make sure we keep the bacteria far from the product," he said, adding that authorities would have been alerted only if bacteria were found in the powdered milk.

Created in 1933 by Besnier's grandfather, Lactalis has become an industry behemoth with annual sales of some 17 billion euros (\$20.6 billion), making it the world's third-largest dairy group, behind Danone and Nestle.

The salmonella scare has cast a harsh spotlight on an executive and a company little known to the public, despite employing 15,000 people in France, where milk and cheese are proudly considered part of the country's heritage.

Analysts say the crisis could dent the company's reputation among anxious parents worldwide.

"This recall may undermine consumer trust in milk formula brands produced using milk from French farms in the emerging markets affected by the recall, which includes China," said Raphael Moreau, a senior analyst at Euromonitor.

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