

Over 400 students fall ill of Egypt army's school meals (Update)

22 March 2017, by Heba Afify

At least 435 students fell ill of suspected food poisoning in public schools across Egypt on Tuesday and Wednesday after consuming government-issued school meals, health officials said.

Egypt's Health Ministry announced on Wednesday that 312 students in schools in Cairo, Suez and Aswan were hospitalized with symptoms of food poisoning, in a succession of mass food poisoning incidents that started earlier this month caused by the school meals, produced by a military-owned company. Some 2,200 students were treated last week for the same symptoms in the southern province of Sohag.

The manager of Beni Suef's central hospital, Mohamed el-Gebaly, told The Associated Press that 25 students from the province south of Cairo are in stable condition and being treated for vomiting and stomach pain.

Hanaa Sorour, a ministry official based in the Nile Delta told AP on Wednesday that another 98 students who showed symptoms of food poisoning in the Delta province of Menoufiya after consuming their school-issued snacks on Tuesday were treated and released from the hospital.

Samar, a housekeeper from Cairo, told the AP that she has been collecting the food given to her children, age 6 and 10, in school every day and throwing it away.

"I make sure to remind my children every day not to eat the snacks that they're given in school. They give them a suspicious-looking piece of cheese with a label that we've never seen before," she said.

In between images of cartoon characters, the packet of the snacks provided by the ministry as part of a project launched to enhance the students' nutrition, carries the logo of the military-owned Al-

Nasr for Services and Maintenance (Queen Service) and the phrase "long live Egypt," which was popularized by President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi and became a trademark for the military and the former defense minister turned president.

Officials at the Education Ministry told local media outlets prior to the start of the current academic year that the ministry had contracted the military's production arm, the National Services Projects Organization (NSPO), to provide the meals. The entity, which encompasses companies producing goods that range from bottled water to construction material, is part of the military's growing economic empire, which has expanded since the election of el-Sissi in 2014.

The Education Ministry said in a statement on Wednesday that it has formed a committee to test the meals and reveal the cause of the students' illness.

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APA citation: Over 400 students fall ill of Egypt army's school meals (Update) (2017, March 22) retrieved 29 September 2020 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-03-students-food-poisoning-egypt.html>

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