

China warns product safety still a worry

By Ben Blanchard
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BEIJING - China's powerful Vice Premier Wu Yi warned on Wednesday the country must not rest on its laurels following a claimed victory in a four-month campaign against shoddy goods, saying it was still too easy to break the law.

Wu, who has led the government's efforts to raise product quality following a series of scandals which have reverberated around the world, said it was quite possible to see a rebound as China's regulatory system and industry were still underdeveloped.

"When we get down to it, in a country with as many people as ours and an industry whose technical and management skills are uneven, you cannot expect to nurture good production and consumer habits in the space of a few months," Wu said.

"It can be seen that although this campaign has solved some outstanding problems, the results achieved have only been initial ones," she told a work conference carried live on central government Web site <http://www.gov.cn>.

On Monday, the government said its safety push had been a total success, with all goals being met months before Beijing hosts the Olympics and 600 companies banned from exporting toys.

Chinese media report problems involving substandard food, drugs and other goods almost every day. The issue burst into the international spotlight when tainted additives exported from China contaminated pet food in North America.

Millions of Chinese-made toys were recalled in 2007, many by U.S. giant Mattel, mainly due to excessive levels of lead paint.

But Wu outlined a long list of issues still confronting the country, including the plethora of small factories in remote areas which often fall beneath the radar and lack of awareness of quality problems among the Chinese public.

"People don't have enough knowledge or the skills to recognise fakes and to say no to them," she said.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

China's legal framework is too underdeveloped to properly tackle the issue, and in some cases overly complicated, Wu added.

"There is still a problem that it costs a lot more to uphold the law than it does to break it," she said.

Food safety problems are particularly pronounced in China's vast countryside, where lax oversight of the many small factories has contributed to a string of food poisoning incidents.

Wu said there were no easy answers for that, other than to step up checks.

She repeated what has become a standard government line that the media, particularly the foreign press, had overhyped the problem with their hysterical reporting, adding that the issue should not be used as an excuse to raise trade barriers.

Public fears about food safety grew in 2004 when at least 13 babies died of malnutrition in Anhui province after they were fed fake milk powder.

Wu said officials should not worry about having a repeat spate of quality problems.

"It's natural that to some degree there will be a rebound, and we should not be scared," she added. "The crucial thing is to guard against it happening, and to remain on our guard constantly."

(Editing by Nick Macfie and Alex Richardson)