China's Food Safety Activists Worry U.N.

By AP / ALEXA OLESEN

(BEIJING) — China has made "remarkable progress" in growing sufficient food to feed its people but its official efforts to silence people who alert the public to food safety problems are worrisome, a U.N. official said Thursday.

China shifted from a food aid recipient to an international food donor in 2005, a sign of its "significant success" in coordinating and helping small-scale farmers boost productivity, said Olivier De Schutter, the U.N. Human Rights Council's independent expert on the right to food.

"It is quite remarkable that this country, despite the restraints it is facing, is able to feed itself and has achieved such a high level of self sufficiency in grain production," De Schutter said at a news conference marking the end of his first trip to China.

China says basic self-sufficiency in staple grains for its 1.3 billion population is a strategic priority, but its growing population, urbanization and pressures on arable land are making that harder. Bumper harvests for the last few years have helped China supply more than 95 percent of its domestic needs.

However, China has also suffered food safety scandals in recent years connected to lax standards, substandard ingredients and fake products that have shaken public confidence.

De Schutter said he was concerned that intimidation and punishment of activists who have highlighted unsafe food would chill such activism when future food safety violations occur. (Read "China's New Scandal: Tainted Milk or Smear Campaign?")

He cited the case against Zhao Lianhai, a Beijing father whose son was sickened by chemically tainted milk formula and who helped organize other parents to protest. Zhao was sentenced last month to 2 1/2 years in jail "for inciting social disorder."

"I think that freedoms of expression, freedoms of association, such as those that Mr. Zhao was exercising, are key to protecting social and economic rights such as the right to food ... I think a situation such as that of Mr. Zhao is a source of concern to all those who defend the right to food," De Schutter said.

His preliminary report summarizing his observations and recommendations encouraged China to boost transparency and access to information to help combat its food safety problems.

De Schutter said he raised Zhao's case in his meetings with China's Foreign Ministry and was told that Zhao was not "prosecuted or convicted for advocacy — he was convicted for public disorder." He said he hoped to continue talking with China about the issue.

His report also urged less use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides that are polluting the environment and that legal protections for small farmers be stronger. Small farms in China sometimes are taken away by corrupt officials and land