

Police put pressure on scammers

The Tianjin Public Security Bureau announced early results on Tuesday in what is expected to be a 20-day campaign against pyramid schemes in the city.

It said police have identified 85 suspects involved in pyramid schemes and broken up 420 dens of the illegal business operation, after two deaths were reported recently.

Around 3,000 police officers have been assigned since Sunday to ferret out the organizations, it added.

About 100 suspects have been arrested in connection with 86 scams since the beginning of this year, according to figures from the bureau.

Pyramid schemes usually involve an organization that compels individuals who wish to join to make a payment, and the organization promises its new members a share of the money taken from every additional member they recruit.

In practice, unwitting victims are often lured to a place they believe they will meet legitimate job recruiters. They are asked, often under duress, to hand over hundreds of yuan to become a member.

The leaders of such organizations always profit from the recruiting of new members.

Zhang Chao, 25, was found dead on a road in Xiqing district of the city on the morning of July 14, four days after he inadvertently joined a pyramid scheme organization, the police said in a statement.

Police detained two people connected to the organization on Monday who admitted abandoning Zhang after finding that he was seriously ill, the police said. Autopsy results will be available in a month.

The body of 21-year-old university graduate Li Wenxing was found on July 14 in a pond in Tianjin's Jinghai district. An autopsy showed that he drowned, but the circumstances that led to his death are still under investigation.

Five people were detained in Li's case, and all confessed to luring him into a pyramid scheme, the police said.

According to media reports, pyramid schemes are rampant in Jinghai district. Local police detained more than 400 suspects in 2015 and 2016. They carried out seven operations targeting one such organization, called Die Beilei, which they say caused the death of Li.

In September 2007, the Tianjin government set up a joint working group to fight against the schemes. The authorities carried out seven operations targeting the illegal activity.

The two deaths made headlines in Chinese media because both of them were

lured into pyramid schemes in Tianjin through job-seeking websites, raising questions about the legitimacy of online recruitment websites and whether the sites should be responsible for vetting advertisers.