More than 100,000 onigiri rice balls containing rice contaminated with pesticides or mold were sold at supermarkets and convenience stores in eight prefectures from February through August, the Aichi prefectural government found.

Between Feb. 13 and Aug. 5, Shinobu Foods Products Co.'s Nagoya factory in Yatomi, Aichi Prefecture, made 102,053 sekihan red bean rice onigiri with 6,864 kilograms of glutinous rice that contained the tainted grain, the prefectural government and Osaka-based Shinobu Foods said Thursday.

These rice balls were sold under the names of "Omusubi Sekihan" and "Onigiri & Inari" at several hundred supermarkets and convenience stores in Aichi, Gifu, Mie, Fukui, Ishikawa, Shizuoka, Nagano and Shiga prefectures.

Shinobu Foods has received no reports about people getting sick from eating its food, according to the company. But officials are clearly perturbed that contaminated rice from overseas was shipped to their company.

"Why was rice from China, and tainted rice at that, mixed in? We had given top priority to the safety and taste of our products and made it a principle to use domestic rice," said Kenji Kato, a Shinobu Foods executive.

"We are very sorry for causing anxiety and trouble to consumers," he said.

Shinobu Foods had bought the glutinous rice from Kyozan Co. in Kyoto. It was apparently among the approximately 100 tons of rice that Kyozan prepared by mixing contaminated rice with other rice.

The tainted rice originally came from Mikasa Foods Co. and a Nagoya-based company, Asai. The rice reached Kyozan between February and July after changing hands several times via several middle dealers.

After the scandal involving Mikasa Foods came to light earlier this month, Shinobu Foods asked all of its rice suppliers if tainted rice could have been included in the rice it had bought.

The company had told its customers it did not deal with any tainted rice because the names of Mikasa and Asai were not mentioned in the inquiry, Shinobu Foods said.

Aeon Co., which runs the Jusco supermarket chain, and Tokai Kiosk Co., which operates the Bellmart convenience stores, were among the operators that sold the rice balls.

Shinobu Foods informed Aeon and Tokai Kiosk about the possibility of tainted rice in the products.
"At this point, we can't confirm how many (possibly contaminated) rice balls were sold at how many stores," an Aeon official said.

The last rice balls that could have contained the tainted rice were made on Aug. 8. Since they were good for maximum 42 hours, the products in question are now off the shelves.

Tainted rice, which was supposed to have been used for industrial use, has reached restaurants, medical facilities and breweries.

On Thursday, the Kyoto board of education reported the first case of the tainted rice being used in school lunches.

The rice was apparently part of the glutinous rice that was shipped by Asai and tainted with methamidophos, a pesticide, well above the permissible limit.

On April 16, 4,528 students and 726 teachers at 47 public junior high schools in the city ate sekihan red bean rice containing the bad rice.

The board of education said the tainted rice posed no health risk because it was used for only one day and the amount was small.(IHT/Asahi: September 20,2008)