



CHINA STRUGGLES TO BALANCE ECONOMY WITH ENVIRONMENT

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In its rush to modernize, China is struggling to balance the demands of a booming economy with growing environmental concerns. This struggle recently erupted onto front pages around the world after a chemical explosion poisoned a major waterway.

An explosion last month at a chemical factory in Jilin, a city in northeastern China, released about 100 tons of toxic chemicals, including cancer causing benzene, into the Songhua River.

The chemical slick has traveled downriver towards Russia and threatens to poison the water supply of ten million.

In the Chinese city of Harbin, a city of 3.8 million people about 250 miles from the accident, the water supply has been shut off and people wait in long lines to receive water sent in from neighboring regions.

“We are now frugal with water,” a woman from Harbin tells Salon. “First we use it to clean vegetables, then to wash our hands, and finally to flush the toilet.”

International impact

The Songhua River in China flows into the Heilong River which becomes the Amur River in Russia.

Officials expect the chemicals to arrive in the Russian city of Khabarovsk by Dec. 10 or 11.

The Russian Far East city of 580,000 is bracing for water shortages and even heat shortages, as the city uses a centralized heating system in which hot water is piped through radiators.

Many don't trust that their government will protect them. Some liken the event to when the Chernobyl Nuclear plant exploded in Ukraine in 1986, once part of the former Soviet Union. It is considered the worst nuclear accident in history. The Soviet government was accused of trying to cover up the accident which ended up killing some 15,000 people and exposing 5 million to harmful radiation.

“People remember Chernobyl, when the government didn't say anything for days or warn residents,” regional government spokeswoman Natalya Zimina told the Associated Press.

The United States has announced that it is sending experts to help China cope with the toxic spill as it reaches the Russian border.

Government response

After initially trying to downplay the environmental disaster by sending in water trucks covered with banners proclaiming how well the government is treating the people, Chinese officials are now admitting that some in the government acted improperly.

The country's chief environmental official, Xie Zhenhua, quit his post Friday and accepted responsibility for the spill.

Complicating the matter, Xie's chief deputy Wang Yuqing said local Jilin officials initially failed to report the factory accident, which prevented the spill from being better controlled, the China Daily reported.

Some regional leaders gave "tacit consent to the discharge of pollutants into rivers in the pursuit of economic growth," Wang said.

However, no local officials have yet to be punished and Xie remains a member of the Communist Party's Central Committee – the inner circle that controls much of the nation's political power.

Booming economy vs. a clean and safe environment

China's economy is growing rapidly following market reforms that allowed a shift from pure communist market ideas to a blend of more socialist and capitalist market ideas.

But that growth has impacted negatively on the environment and the safety of workers. According to official statistics, 350 Chinese die daily in industrial accidents. But the true number may be much higher.

An explosion at a state-owned coal mine in Qitaihe, in northeastern China, killed 171 miners in late November.

In response to the latest blast, Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao criticized the coal industry.

"The various safety measures we've formulated haven't been really implemented, and many of them are no more than passed down or repeated orally," he said.

Despite government assurances that mine safety will improve, families of miners killed in Qitaihe are resigned that their dangerous life will continue.

"There's nothing we can do about it," former miner and the father of a killed miner told the Associated Press. "We need to work, and the work is dangerous. We need to get on with life."

As China's economy continues to expand at a record pace, the central government in Beijing must face the growing dangers its own success are posing to the nation's workers and environment.

-- *Compiled by Annie Schleicher for NewsHour Extra*
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