

ChinaNews

News briefs



LONG HONGTAO / XINHUA

A fishing boat flounders on a dried-up part of the Xiangjiang River in Changsha, capital of Central China's Hunan province, after the lengthy drought that has affected much of the country lowered the level of the water. See Page 10

WEATHER

Crops dry up as drought drags on

A prolonged and severe drought that has ravaged some of China's major grain-producing areas is raising concern about the next harvest, says the Ministry of Agriculture.

By Feb 4, the arid conditions had affected more than 6.4 million hectares of wheat, or about 35 percent of the crop planted in the affected areas.

The ministry said the drought has affected eight major grain-producing provinces and has been building since October.

The eight provinces together produce more than 80 percent of the country's winter wheat, the ministry explained, adding that the situation might worsen as temperatures rise during the crucial spring growing season and significantly damage this summer's harvest.

In a bid to deal with the difficult problem the drought has caused, the ministry has asked agricultural departments at all levels to strengthen their efforts to channel water to affected areas, enhance irrigation and ensure the availability of fertilizer.

INFRASTRUCTURE

\$608b injection for water projects

Efforts will be intensified to promote water conservation as well as the sustainable use of the precious resource, and the task will be a multi-trillion yuan national priority, a central policy document said.

The country will invest 4 trillion yuan (\$608 billion) into projects

during the next decade to improve water conservation, said Chen Xiwen, director of the office for the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee's Leading Group on Rural Work.

He made the remarks at a news conference held by the State Council Information Office on Feb 6, a day after the CPC central authorities issued their first document of the year.

The country aims to double its average annual spending on water conservation over the next 10 years compared to the 200 billion yuan investment in 2010, according to the document, also known as the No 1 document.

The government will also encourage loans to, and private investment in, the water sector to ensure funding for conservation, it said.

LAW

Rules aim to stamp out judicial corruption

China's top court is set to bring in three new regulations aimed at ensuring judges are not swayed by family ties or other types of relationships when making legal decisions. The move is the latest salvo in its attempts to deal with judicial corruption and began last year with the Supreme People's Court starting to draft the three regulations.

The first regulation refers to avoiding possible conflicts of interest among judges, technically called recusal, because of the involvement in cases of family members who are lawyers.

The second tackles the pleading or interceding of the relatives of judges, their friends or other people.

And the third targets lax manage-

ment and poor working practices on the part of some local courts and urges court staff members, especially judicial police officers, to perform their duties in accordance with the law.

TOURISM

Scuffle sullies image of Hong Kong tours

The recent scuffle between a tour guide and her tourists may force the Hong Kong government to set up a new regulatory body for the industry.

Commissioner for Tourism Philip Yung said the government has "deeply reviewed" the regulatory system of Hong Kong's tourism industry, including the feasibility of setting up a new independent body to regulate the industry apart from the current Travel Industry Council of Hong Kong (TIC). The TIC has been labeled as ineffective since a series of incidents surfaced of mainland tourists being forced to shop.

The government will pass the review results to the Legislative Council for discussion by the end of this month, Yung said.

ENVIRONMENT

New Year fireworks blamed for pollution

Fireworks set off during the Chinese New Year holiday led to air pollution throughout the country, while also being blamed as the cause of many fire accidents and injuries.

Often set off during the Chinese New Year holiday with a goal of warding off evil spirits, fireworks have come at a serious environmental cost, filling the air with high levels of sulfur and thick smoke and

pushing up the air-pollution index across large cities.

In Shanghai, the real-time air quality monitoring and forecasting system showed that the local pollution index jumped from below 100 at 8 pm on Feb 6 to 439 at midnight on Feb 7, a time span that coincided with frequent ignitions of fireworks.

According to China's environmental standards, readings below 50 indicate "excellent" air quality, while results of up to 100 are considered to be "good". Anything above 100 is a sign of pollution.

Across China, 22 of the country's 86 most prominent cities saw their air-pollution index rise past 100 on Feb 7, according to the Ministry of Environmental Protection.

JUSTICE

213 counties will receive free legal aid

Free legal aid for disadvantaged groups in 213 poverty-stricken central and western counties, currently without access to lawyers, will be provided this year in an effort to promote judicial fairness, a senior justice official said.

Sun Jianying, head of the legal aid department under the Ministry of Justice, said the ministry will send at least 213 lawyers and 150 college students as volunteers to selected counties in a government-sponsored program.

The government has earmarked 12 million yuan in a special fund to guarantee that the program runs smoothly, Sun said.

Ensuring each of the 213 counties has a lawyer will "benefit disadvantaged litigants, including the disabled, the elderly, minors and migrant workers," Sun said.

DIPLOMACY

US ambassador to China resigns

US Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman has resigned, amid reports that he might seek the Republican nomination in 2012 and try to deprive President Barack Obama of a second term.

Huntsman, a former Utah governor, handed his resignation letter to the White House and the resignation will be effective from Apr 30.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs sidestepped questions about Huntsman's political intentions, as anticipation builds for Obama's re-election bid and several prominent Republicans take soundings of their chances.

Obama's 2009 choice of Huntsman to serve in the crucial Beijing post was seen as a political masterstroke, potentially taking one possible rival out of the game in the upcoming presidential election.

CHINA DAILY — AGENCIES

Quotable

"God knows how many text messages I received on Spring Festival Eve... I never send such messages because I don't consider pressing the button saying 'send message to all contacts' is sincere."

YIN NI, an online store owner in Beijing, said flood of New Year's mobile message greetings drowns out cheerful spirit.

"We shouldn't marry simply because we reach marital age. We'll find true love but it takes time. Sometimes parents push us too hard. The pressure is especially bad for women who are almost 30... I empathize with them."

HOWE C, a netizen, describing China's growing population of single urbanities facing huge pressure to marry.

"Unlike the older generation who only work in the cities, more than 70 percent of the new generation of workers are willing to also live in the cities. They want to earn respect and be part of the city."

LIANG GUIQUAN, director of the Guangdong Academy of Social Sciences, explaining why an increasing number of migrant workers choose to celebrate the Spring Festival in their adoptive cities.



LIANG GUIQUAN