

Health

Chinese farmer turned eco-warrior now plans to take on big business

At war with a subsidiary of China's largest chemical firm

YUSHUTUN: Wang Enlin, an elderly farmer who left school when he was 10 years old and taught himself law armed with a single textbook and dictionary, makes for an unlikely eco-warrior. Yet the 64-year-old is determined to reap justice as he readies for a fresh battle in his war with a subsidiary of China's largest chemical firm, which he accuses of polluting and destroying his farmland.

"In China, behind every case of pollution is a case of corruption," he said of his mission to bring Qihua Chemical Group (also known as Heilongjiang Haohua Chemical) to account. Wang and other villagers from northeast Heilongjiang province have sued Qihua accusing it of contaminating their soil, rendering it untenable for crops, in a case that has stretched on for more than 16 years.

This February, Wang and his self-styled "Senior Citizen Environmental Protection Team" earned a rare victory when a local court ordered Qihua to clear up their chemical waste site-adjacent to the farmers' land-and pay a total of 820,000 yuan (\$120,000) to compensate for lost harvests in 55 affected rural households. But that ruling was overturned on appeal, and Wang is now gearing up to fight back on another day in court. "We will absolutely win. The law is on our side," Wang said. His case is testing the possibilities of a national environmental protection law revised in 2015. The legislation was widely touted as a way to open the courts to public interest environmental damage lawsuits, but has been criticized for poor implementation.

Change your fate

Qihua is a subsidiary of the state-owned ChemChina, the country's largest chemical enterprise. It specializes in crude oil processing and petroleum products. Wang's battle began in 2001, when a village committee leased 28.5 hectares to Qihua for use as a chemical waste dumping ground without the villagers' consent.

The villagers claim that the company failed to take proper pollution control measures. Wang says he felt compelled to teach himself law after realising he lacked the knowledge or resources to take on the might of an industrial giant. China had just emerged from its Great Famine when Wang left school: "It didn't matter at the time whether you got an education," he said. "It wouldn't change your fate." He was well into middle age when he found a textbook on environmental law at a local bookstore. It took him years to understand as he painstakingly looked up unfamiliar terms in a dog-eared dictionary.

After petitioning the local authorities to no avail, he



YUSHUTUN: Books are stacked inside the room of farmer Wang Enlin in his house



YUSHUTUN: In this picture taken on August 21, 2017, farmer Wang Enlin sits in his room inside his house. — AFP photos

received aid in 2007 from the Centre for Legal Assistance to Pollution Victims, which helped the villagers put together a lawsuit using evidence he had compiled. A 2013 sam-

pling of mercury levels conducted on the site by the Green Beagle Institute, a Beijing-based non-profit, found the land was "not suitable for agricultural use".

The Ministry of Environmental Protection included Qihua in a 2014 list of "major" environmental cases. But it was still another year before Wang's case was accepted into China's justice system. Prominent environmentalist Ma Jun told AFP that while the litigation process has been streamlined since 2015, pollution lawsuits can still take years to be heard partly because "local governments give some degree of

protection to polluting companies". Today Wang prepares his own legal paperwork and hosts daily gatherings at his home for villagers hoping to learn about their rights.

Wang, who suffers from lung problems and requires medicine to help him breathe, accuses Qihua of "pretending to be deaf and mute" on the issue. He says he is frequently visited by police officers who urge him to drop the case and stop talking to the media. Qihua's lawyers declined to comment on the case.

'Corrupt officials'

In September, the Qiqihar Intermediate People's Court accepted Wang's request to appeal the ruling that overturned his initial victory. "We're just farmers, without any resources or power," said Wang Baoqin (no relation), a

member of Wang Enlin's senior citizens' environmental group. "Against the government, we can't win. Against those corrupt officials, we definitely can't win. So we decided to take the side road and fight the company."

According to Rachel Stern, the author of "Environmental Litigation in China: A Study in Political Ambivalence," the number of new legal cases related to natural resources has increased tenfold over the past decade. The Supreme People's Court heard 133,000 such cases last year. Some complainants have found success: in 2015, a petrol giant was ordered to pay 1.68 million yuan (\$265,000) to 21 fishermen whose livelihoods suffered from oil spills.

Qihua's plant did not appear to be in operation when AFP reporters visited in late August. The land was dry and marked by patches of overgrown grass, no longer the site of a massive wastewater pond. But no crops will grow in the spot again, Wang Baoqin predicted. "We may not even see justice in our lifetimes," she said. "We're doing this for the generations to come." —AFP

“ Behind every case of pollution is a case of corruption ”

Frozen treats, supplies rocketing toward space station

CAPE CANAVERAL: A stash of frozen treats and other supplies rocketed toward the International Space Station yesterday, this time from Virginia's cold eastern shore. NASA's commercial shipper, Orbital ATK, launched the cargo ship just after sunrise from Wallops Island, aboard an unmanned Antares rocket. The Cygnus capsule should reach the orbiting lab Tuesday. It's loaded with 7,400 pounds of cargo, including sweet treats for the six station astronauts. There are frozen fruit bars, ice cream bars, ice cream sandwiches and cups of chocolate and vanilla ice cream - about 80 in all, according to NASA.

This marked Orbital ATK's first launch from its home turf in more than a year. The last time it made a space station delivery, it used another company's rocket flying from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Crowds gathered at Wallops in freezing temperatures and cheered as the rocket soared toward the southeast. Sunrise made it hard to see the launch farther afield. The field of visibility stretched from New England to the Carolinas.

A launch attempt on Saturday was nixed after a plane strayed into the restricted airspace. Sunday's try was almost foiled by a couple of boats that briefly wandered into the keep-out zone. Orbital ATK named the capsule after the last man to walk on the moon, Apollo 17's Gene Cernan, who died in January. During the final minutes of the countdown, a launch controller paid tribute to Cernan as well as JR Thompson, a high-ranking NASA and Orbital ATK official who died last week. SpaceX is NASA's other prime supplier. It's making a station delivery next month. —AP

US cities, states defy Trump, still back Paris climate deal

BONN, Germany: A group of US states, cities, businesses and universities said Saturday they are still committed to curbing global warming even as US President Donald Trump's administration is walking away from the Paris climate accord. But the alliance, which has an economy larger than Japan and Germany combined, says it won't be able to achieve the necessary cut in greenhouse gas emissions without some efforts at the federal level.

"It is important for the world to know, the American government may have pulled out of the Paris agreement, but the American people are committed to its goals, and there is nothing Washington can do to stop us," former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg said at a global climate meeting in Bonn, Germany. Gov Jerry Brown of California

echoed those comments.

"In the United States, we have a federal system, and states have real power as do cities. And when cities and states combine together, and then join with powerful corporations, that's how we get stuff done," he said. His speech was briefly interrupted by anti-coal and anti-fracking protesters, who held up banners and shouted "We're still in! Trump's still out!"

The group calling itself "America's Pledge" said states, cities and private groups have been taking considerable steps to reduce emissions by promoting renewable energy use and climate-friendly transportation systems. "This is a pledge, and it's a pledge that you can cash, because it's real," Brown said. "We are doing real stuff in California."

In a report, however, the group said that "we cannot underscore strongly enough the critical nature of federal engagement to achieve the deep decarbonization goals the US must undertake after 2025." Daniel Firger, one of the report's contributors, said it was intended to show that many in the US aren't prepared to wait for Trump to change his

mind on climate change again or wait for the next administration to tackle the issue. "The good news around Trump's announcement to withdraw is that it has galvanized a groundswell of bottom-up support from all corners of the US economy," Firger told The Associated Press.

Cities, regions and businesses in other nations around the world could look to the group for inspiration and support, he said, noting that the lessons learned by local authorities and businesses in the U.S. could be applied elsewhere. Also Saturday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said in her weekly podcast that every country needs to pitch in to keep global temperatures from rising.

Merkel also said it's the responsibility of the industrial countries to develop environment-friendly technologies that are future-oriented, but "don't lead to a loss of jobs." "We don't gain anything if steel mills, aluminum plants and copper mills leave our countries and go somewhere else where environmental regulations are less strict - because then we haven't made any gains for world climate," she said. —AP

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PAGE

248 33 199

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