

CHOKED BY SMOG, BEIJING CREATES NEW ENVIRONMENTAL POLICE



BEIJING, China: A child rides behind a man as they cross the road by bicycle in Beijing, China yesterday. —AP

BEIJING: Officials in Beijing have announced a new environmental police squad to root out illegal burning, the latest government response to the widespread public anger over China's persistent problems with smog.

Beijing's acting mayor, Cai Qi, said at a meeting Saturday that the force would target open-air barbecues, garbage incineration and the burning of wood and other biomass, according to the state-run Xinhua News Agency. Cai announced several other measures Saturday, including a target of cutting the use of coal by 30 percent in 2017 to shutting down 500 higher-polluting factories and upgrading 2,500 more. About 300,000 high-pollution vehicles will also be restricted from entering the city starting next month, he said.

Beijing and dozens of cities in China

spend many winter days under a thick, gray haze, with air pollution levels that routinely exceed World Health Organization guidelines. Beijing spent part of last week under an "orange alert," the second-highest level in China's four-tiered air alert system. More than 20 cities were on the highest "red alert." Smog is an acutely felt issue in China's cities, where a "red alert" can lead to the closure of schools and businesses, flight cancellations, and shutdowns of highways to keep cars off the roads. During a red alert in Beijing last month, authorities banned construction crews from spray-painting and even seized the charcoal grills from some restaurants.

But enforcement remains an issue. China's environmental ministry said during last week's red alert that its inspection teams found companies resuming production despite

a government ban. Many factories remain under severe pressure to meet production targets regardless of air pollution. Cai on Saturday blamed polluting activities like burning garbage or wood on "the result of lax supervision and weak law enforcement." But China's pollution is caused chiefly by its thousands of coal-burning factories and a surplus of older, inefficient vehicles. While it tries to answer the loud public calls to tamp down on pollution, China's Communist government is also grappling with an economic slowdown and the challenge of maintaining growth. China is also the world's largest producer and consumer of coal, and measures like capping production days or shutting down older coal mines run the risk of driving up energy prices and further slowing the economy. —AP



SAKARAH, Madagascar: Malagasy workers from an informal Sapphire mine seep soil through a strainer in the waters of a river looking for gems on the outskirts of Sakaraha, Madagascar. —AFP photos



SAKARAH, Madagascar: A malagasy Sapphire miner resurfaces from a hole in the ground during mining at an informal Sapphire mine.



SAKARAH, Madagascar: Malagasy workers from an informal Sapphire mine seep soil through a strainer in the waters of a river looking for gems.



SAKARAH, Madagascar: A malagasy Sapphire woman miner looks at a stone in a mining hole in the ground during mining at an informal Sapphire mine.

FORTUNE HUNTERS FLOCK TO MADAGASCAR'S SAPPHIRE MINES

'JUST DIGGING THE HOLE ITSELF TAKES TIME, ALMOST TWO WEEKS'

BETSINEFE, Madagascar: The dusty figure is lowered slowly into the ground like a bucket into a well, armed with just a crowbar, a shovel and an old, unreliable headlamp. In the surrounding countryside, bodies rise and sink from hundreds of holes just wide enough for a man. Children run between the rubble and the smell of cooking wafts from the makeshift shelters where women crouch over pots. Guards armed with hunting rifles stand by, turning the settlement of Betsinefe into a threatening scene.

In the world of Madagascan sapphire mining, there are few rules. Sapphires were first discovered in Madagascar in the late 1990s, and already the Indian Ocean island is one of the world's largest producers of the precious stones. Its 250-kilometre-long (155-mile) deposit is among the biggest in the world and has sparked a sapphire rush. Activity at this informal, though not entirely illegal, mine in the southwest of the country was suspended recently by authorities after scuffles broke out between villagers and would-be miners flocking in from the rest of the island.

Andry Razafindrakoto, a 19-year-old student from the nearest big town of Tulear, was one of the many hoping to make their fortune. "I came here to mine sapphires because it's difficult to

find work in other areas," he told AFP. When he sold his haul of stones for some four million ariary (\$1,200), he bought his own equipment and today manages a small team of nine miners.

'Sometimes we find nothing'

But success stories are rare. Like most of his fellow miners, Albert Soja does not earn wages for his countless, grueling trips underground. To make money, he must find and sell stones. "Of course it's scary, but when you want to succeed, you have to take risks," he said, a woollen beanie pulled tightly on his head despite the suffocating heat.

"Just digging the hole itself takes time, almost two weeks." "Sometimes we find nothing... it can take months to find something interesting." Without sapphires to sell, he depends on the mine "bosses"—gem shop owners, usually of Sri Lankan origin, in the neighboring town of Sakaraha—for a few handfuls of rice or manioc to survive. "The bosses pay for our food and materials, which helps us hold out. Without their help, we would starve," said Soja. "After that, we're obliged to sell them the stones we find."

Lucrative trade

Sitting behind his desk in his gem shop in Sakaraha, Sunil W.J.—as he calls himself—exam-

ined his latest buy of blue and pink and light yellow sapphires under a lamp. His two "bodyguards" toured the surrounding mines to collect the stones and pay for miners' food. The best finds are sent to Sri Lanka, to be polished, cut and sold, Sunil explained. Theoretically, the extraction of sapphires is regulated by Madagascar's mining code, which insists on permits and the redistribution of a share of the taxes to benefit local municipalities.

In practice, the industry is largely unregulated, but it is a lucrative trade, said Sunil. A stone that fetches \$300 in Sri Lanka costs him less than a tenth of the price to buy from a miner in Madagascar. On the question of taxes, Sunil was less certain of his figures, but said he paid a 10 percent export tax to authorities in the capital Antananarivo. "These small sapphire mines are beyond the control of the state, so there are no official statistics," Mines Minister Ying Vah Zafilahy told AFP, vowing industry reform to bring them under formal regulation. A local elected official in Sakaraha, who asked to remain anonymous, said the municipality was not receiving any taxes or income from the many mining operations underway. "Some days are better than others, but this business has a future," said Sunil, laughing. —AFP



CLEVELAND ZOO SAYS 32-YEAR-OLD GORILLA HAS DIED

CLEVELAND: One of the Cleveland zoo's two male western lowland gorillas died on Friday, zoo officials said. Cleveland Metroparks Zoo first announced the death of 32-year-old Bebac on its Facebook page. Zoo Executive Director Chris Kuhar called Bebac one of the zoo's iconic animals in an interview Saturday. Dozens of tributes along with photos of Bebac taken by zoo visitors were posted on Facebook. Bebac, pronounced BEE'-bak, and 29-year-old Mokolo, pronounced mo-KO'-lo, came to the Cleveland zoo in 1994 from Chicago's Lincoln Park

Zoo, where they both were born. The zoo's medical staff struggled to find a treatment to make Bebac well after his health began deteriorating a month ago, Kuhar said. Gorillas living in captivity have an average life expectancy of about 30 years. "It's been hard on the staff," Kuhar said. "It's like losing a family member." Bebac and Mokolo were diagnosed with heart conditions in 2008, a chronic problem for zoo gorillas, and put on medications used to treat high blood pressure in humans. The zoo reported in 2011 that the pair's health had improved

after being placed on high-fiber diets and made to forage for food, which is scattered inside their enclosure. As zoo staffers mourn, Mokolo appears to be affected as well, Kuhar said. "What we're seeing is Mokolo calling to figure out where Bebac went," Kuhar said. "We can tell he's agitated. I think there's an emotional response there." It's too soon to determine when or from where a companion for Mokolo might be found, he said. The Columbus Zoo and Aquarium's female gorilla named Colo turned 60 on Dec 22. She is the oldest living gorilla in the US. —AP