

## International

# 'The water is poison': China's activist spends life protecting polluted lake

## Campaigner challenges businesses to clean up their act

**KUNMING:** Environmental activist Zhang Zhengxiang is almost blind, and lives in poverty—but he has successfully faced down hundreds of companies on the banks of one of China's most polluted lakes. The 74-year-old strident campaigner has spent his life trying to protect the sprawling Lake Dian in southwestern China, challenging businesses to clean up their act around the local beauty spot and reporting those who pollute it. "When I was a child, we could see the bottom of the lake. When I was thirsty, I drank the water from the lake—we used it for cooking," he said.

"The water has become poison. We can't drink it, use it, or even touch it." It can be risky work. In China grassroots social movements are heavily suppressed by the government, and environmental activists and the lawyers that represent them have in the past faced stiff reprisals and even jail terms. Zhang says he has been attacked by disgruntled businesses, but is undeterred. Several times a week, he patrols the red-soil banks with binoculars in search of polluters, snapping pictures on a small compact camera.



**KUNMING:** Environmental activist Zhang Zhengxiang holds rocks that he says are polluted at an area which used to be a cement factory construction site near Dian Lake in Kunming, in southwestern China's Yunnan province. — AFP

wild, learning to forage in the wild to survive.

"The lake is a living being, but it has no voice in the story. It is my duty to defend it," he told AFP. "(The lake) is my second mother." China's decades of breakneck growth saw industrialists flock to the region's rich mining soil and natural resources. But the influx caused huge pollution. Zhang started to denounce polluting companies who exploited resources or built without permission—often facing an uphill struggle to reach sympathetic ears. Local officials simply haven't done enough to protect the local environment, he says. "Why? Because they had collaborated with these enterprises," he said.

Zhang's lakeside house is packed floor-to-ceiling with papers and reports about his work. Businessman Zhou Guangwen's quarry closed nearly two decades ago after Zhang reported it to the authorities. But the two men are close friends, and Zhou says although he lost all the money he invested in the mine, he now has sympathy for Zhang's environmental efforts. Zhang claims he has brought about the closure of more than 200 factories—but it has all taken a toll. "Local executives, the owners of mines and quarries whom he denounced... many people hate him," added Zhou.

tant because if authorized or approved, this oral drug is particularly well-suited for low- and middle-income countries and could play a critical role in saving lives." The drug "is to be taken together with ritonavir, an HIV medicine we know well, as we have had a license on it for many years, and we will be working with generic companies to ensure there is enough supply for both COVID-19 and HIV."

### HIV drug mix

Pfizer will forego royalties on sales in all countries covered by the agreement while COVID-19 remains classified as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern by the World Health Organization. Last month, the WHO maintained the highest level of alert over the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19. Paxlovid, or PF-07321332, is an investigational antiviral therapy designed to block the activity of the SARS-CoV-2-3CL protease—an enzyme that the coronavirus needs to replicate.

Taking it together with a low dose of ritonavir helps slow the breakdown of PF-07321332. It therefore remains active in the body for a longer period at a high concentration, to help combat the virus. If taken at the first sign of infection or exposure to COVID-19, the pill could potentially help patients avoid severe illness, which can lead to hospitalization and death, Pfizer said. "We believe oral antiviral treatments can play a vital role in reducing the severity of COVID-19 infections, decreasing the strain on our healthcare systems and saving lives," said Pfizer chairman and chief executive Albert Bourla. "We must work to ensure that all people—regardless of where they live or their circumstances—have access to these breakthroughs." —AFP



## Beijing invests over \$7.8 billion to protect lake

One of China's largest freshwater lakes, the vast expanse of water nestles the city of Kunming which recently hosted an international biodiversity conference. But decades of agricultural, industrial, mining and human waste are destroying it. Beijing has invested more than 50 billion yuan (\$7.8 billion) to protect the lake, building dozens of treatment plants and diverting a river to supply it with fresh water. But the surface of the water is still cloudy, and covered with green algae.

### Duty to defend

Zhang was born in a village by the water's shore and spent years living off the lake, eating its fish and fruits from the surrounding forest. His father died when he was five, and his mother left shortly afterwards, leaving him and his two siblings to fend for themselves. His younger brothers died during the years of China's devastating famine, leaving Zhang entirely alone and living in the

## Pfizer strikes global licensing deal for COVID-19 pill

**GENEVA:** US pharmaceutical giant Pfizer yesterday announced a deal to make its oral antiviral COVID-19 medication available more cheaply in poorer countries, if the promising pill passes trials and regulatory approval. Pfizer, which also produces a COVID vaccine with German lab BioNTech, said it had signed an agreement to sub-licence production of its Paxlovid pill to generic drug manufacturers, without receiving royalties. The deal with the global Medicines Patent Pool (MPP) would therefore make the candidate drug available at a lower cost in 95 low- and middle-income countries covering around 53 percent of the world's population. It follows a similar deal for US rival Merck & Co last month. The drug is to be taken with the HIV medicine ritonavir. Interim data from ongoing trials demonstrated an 89 percent reduction in the risk of COVID-19-related hospitalization or death compared to a placebo, in non-hospitalised high-risk adults with COVID-19 within three days of symptom onset, said Pfizer.

Similar results were seen within five days of symptom onset, it added. The Geneva-based MPP is a United Nations-backed international organization that works to facilitate the development of medicines for low- and middle-income nations. MPP executive director Charles Gore said: "This license is so impor-



**GHAZNI:** Afghan burqa-clad women walk on a street in a neighborhood of Ghazni City, in the province of Ghazni. — AFP

## Man arrested for selling 130 women in Afghanistan

**KUNDUZ:** The Taliban have arrested a man for allegedly selling dozens of women in northern Afghanistan after duping them into believing they would be marrying into money, officials said yesterday. The man was arrested in northern Jawzjan province late on Monday, Damullah Seraj, the Taliban provincial police chief, told reporters. "We are still in our initial stages of the investigation. We hope to find out more about this case later," he said.

Mohammad Sardar Mubariz, a district police chief in Jawzjan, told AFP the man would target poor women desperate to improve their circumstances. After saying he would find them a wealthy husband, he would move them to a different province where they were instead sold into servitude. He allegedly trafficked around 130 women this way.

Crime, nepotism and corruption are not new in Afghanistan but rising poverty is undermining the Taliban government's claim to legitimacy. Since their return to power about three months ago, the Taliban are trying to contain a spate of crimes such as robberies and kidnappings in the big cities. Yesterday, the Taliban interior ministry said 60 people—including members of the passport department—were arrested for forging documents to obtain passports. The ministry said it was temporarily closing the passport office in Kabul for maintenance. — AFP

### Steel tiger

In 2002, the activist was badly injured when hit by an unlicensed truck while gathering evidence about an illegal quarry. Zhang believes the collision—which left him partially blind and broke his arm—was deliberate. He says he has suffered other attacks over the years. "They beat me, hurt me, tore down my house and grabbed my farmland," he told AFP. "I'm not afraid. They are paper tigers and I am a steel tiger". Environmental campaigners in China must walk a fine line or risk the wrath of local officials and businesses.

Teenage campaigner Howey Ou braved years of intimidation, including being kicked out of school, before leaving the country to lobby from abroad. Zhang, who was lauded a "true ambassador of the environment" on the national TV show "Inspiring China", says he is finally being listened to. In May, a giant real estate project on the lake's eastern shore was declared illegal. And a former deputy mayor who held responsibility for tackling water pollution was placed under investigation last month. "We have seen a turning point in water pollution in China since the mid-2000s," said Chinese environmentalist Ma Jun. — AFP



**SANTA FE:** This handout photo shows a portrait of Ifeoma Ozoma at her home in Santa Fe, New Mexico. — AFP

## Ifeoma Ozoma: US tech whistleblower helping others speak out

**WASHINGTON:** Being a whistleblower comes down to careful preparation but also an eye trained for dirty tricks, said Ifeoma Ozoma, an ex-employee of several Silicon Valley giants turned revealer of tech world wrongdoing. "I planned it like a program or product launch. Obviously the experience is something very personal, but I approached it like work," she said.

While Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen has become a figurehead for the fight against social media's faults, there are others in the tech world, like Ozoma, who have also taken big risks to stand up. An African-American, former policymaker relations specialist for Google, Pinterest and Facebook, she continues to work for ethics in tech, but from the outside, via her consulting firm Earthseed. She has marked a first big success via the recent adoption in California of a law she co-sponsored, called "Silenced No More."

Starting in January, this law will prohibit employers from using confidentiality clauses to prevent victims of harassment or discrimination in the workplace from speaking out. In mid-October, she posted online a guide for whistleblowers. "The difference with tech companies and other industries is on the power that they wield, but also they pretend they're better for workers, consumers, society than more traditional industries," she told AFP. "That's just not borne out in reality."

### Keep the emails

A Yale University graduate in political science, the 29-year-old was born in Alaska to Nigerian immigrants. She left Pinterest at the end of May 2020, with six months of salary, after months of making complaints internally and also to the state of California, accusing the social network of discrimination and racist retaliation.

She said the company paid her less than if she had been a man, but she also complained about their lack of action after a colleague posted her personal details online to expose her to anonymous harassment. In mid-June 2020, as the Black Lives Matter anti-racism movements were in full swing in the United States, her damning account on Twitter of her experience sparked a scandal for the company that had largely avoided controversy. — AFP

### News in brief

#### Prince Charles visits Jordan

**AMMAN:** Prince Charles and his wife Camilla arrived in Amman yesterday to begin a tour of Jordan and Egypt, their first since the coronavirus pandemic began last year. The prince's visit comes amid concerns about the health of Queen Elizabeth II, who missed the annual Remembrance service at the Cenotaph in London on Sunday "having sprained her back". Britain's heir apparent and his wife the Duchess of Cornwall were expected to meet King Abdullah II and Queen Rania later. They were also due to visit Al-Maghtas, or Bethany Beyond the Jordan, the site where the faithful believe Jesus Christ was baptized. Jordan is a close British ally but the king has recently come under pressure over leaks pointing to offshore wealth, as well as an alleged coup plot against him earlier this year. — AFP

#### 900 kg lobsters seized

**HONG KONG:** Hong Kong customs officers seized nearly 900 kilograms of live lobsters on a speedboat on Monday night, as authorities step up a crackdown on the smuggling of Australian rock lobsters into mainland China. With relations between the two countries strained, China has restricted imports of several Australian products. Among them are lobsters, a sought-after delicacy in mainland China. Imports of Australian rock lobsters to Hong Kong - which has no such restrictions - have since skyrocketed, with suspicions that the vast majority end up on mainland tables. On Monday night, 890 kilograms of live lobsters and about 930 kilograms of sea cucumbers were found on a double-engine speedboat trying to leave harbor on the south of Hong Kong Island under cover of darkness, according to Lui Siu-fai, a divisional commander with the city's customs department. — AFP

#### Junta charges Suu Kyi

**YANGON:** Myanmar's junta has charged Aung San Suu Kyi with committing electoral fraud during the 2020 polls, state media reported yesterday, the latest in a barrage of allegations against her since her party won in a landslide. Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military coup in February sparked nationwide protests and a deadly crackdown on dissent. Detained since the putsch, Suu Kyi, 76, has been charged with illegally importing walkie talkies, sedition and corruption, and faces decades in jail if convicted. Suu Kyi is now also accused of "election fraud and lawless actions" during the polls, state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar reported, without giving details on when court proceedings would begin. — AFP

#### Sikh pilgrimage to Pakistan

**NEW DELHI:** India gave the green light for thousands of Sikh pilgrims to cross the border into Pakistan from today ahead of the birth anniversary of the religion's founder Guru Nanak. The Kartarpur Corridor, a visa-free crossing allowing Indian Sikhs to visit the temple in Pakistan where Guru Nanak died in 1539, first opened in 2019 for Nanak's 550th birth anniversary but was closed last year because of the pandemic. India's Home Minister Amit Shah announced that the corridor will re-open from today ahead of Nanak's birth anniversary celebrations this Friday. "In a major decision, that will benefit large numbers of Sikh pilgrims, PM @narendramodi gov't has decided to re-open the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor from tomorrow," he said on Twitter. — AFP

#### 'No Afghan-style evacuation'

**WASHINGTON:** The United States urged its nationals once again Monday to leave war-torn Ethiopia immediately on their own, warning that there will be no Afghanistan-style military evacuation from the country. The US embassy has been calling on US citizens for several days to take commercial flights to leave the country, where rebel groups no longer rule out marching on the capital Addis Ababa. The embassy offers loans to those who are unable to purchase a ticket immediately. "We are doing that not because we are pessimistic about the prospects for peace, but because we are practical," said State Department spokesman Ned Price. — AFP

#### Ex-minister's home attacked

**DEHRADUN:** Hindu militants attacked and set fire to the home of a former Indian foreign minister, police said, in the latest incident of religious violence that critics say has been inflamed under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Salman Khurshid, a Muslim from the main opposition Congress party, published a book last month in which he compared the kind of Hindu nationalism that has flourished under Modi to extremist Islamic groups like ISIS. Police said a mob of around 20 people from a hardline local Hindu group massed outside Khurshid's house near the northern city of Nainital on Monday. "They shouted slogans, threw stones, broke several windows, ransacked (the entry) and set fire (to a door)," local police chief Jagdish Chandra said. — AFP