

China bows to public over chemical plant

BEIJING

In an unusual capitulation to public pressure, Beijing is to relocate a controversial billion-dollar chemical plant away from the picturesque seaport of Xiamen in southeast China.

The decision, hailed as a milestone for China's environmental and democratic movements, follows the release of an environmental-impact assessment of the project at a public hearing in December. The relocation is even more surprising given that sources close to central government reveal the plant had been given the go-ahead because of the special relationship between Chen Youhao — the plant's Taiwanese investor and a fugitive of Taiwan — and some of China's top party leaders.

"This is the first time public opinion was properly expressed through official channels and had an impact on government policies," says Liu Jianqiang, a Beijing-based environmental writer who is a visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. Some commentators regard the orchestrated incident as the most significant public event in China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square student demonstration that was so brutally suppressed.

Construction of the plant, owned by Dragon Aromatics, part of Chen's Xianglu and Dragon Group, began in November 2006 in Xiamen's Haicang district, which has a population of 100,000. It is set to produce 800,000 tonnes of paraxylene annually, used to make plastics and polyester.

The plant's health and environmental dangers were made public last March when Zhao Yufen, a researcher at the College of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering at Xiamen University, led a petition to the Beijing parliament calling for the plant to be relocated away from residential areas. "Paraxylene is highly toxic and could cause cancer and birth defects," said Zhao in an interview with the Chinese newspaper *China Business*.

Lian Yue, a prominent writer living near Xiamen, posted the article on his blog, prompting fervent national debate. On 1 June, tens of thousands of Xiamenese protested peacefully against the 'Xiamen PX Project' and the company's pollution records in the region.

This development alarmed officials in Beijing. A few days later, deputy environment minister Pan Yue called for an independent environmental-impact assessment of the plant as well



AP/COLOR CHINA PHOTO

Marchers on the streets of Xiamen protest against plans for a chemical plant in the region.

as of Xiamen's urban development plans. Pan also suggested that the relevant parties should comply with recently announced regulations on environmental-impact assessments that require a public-consultation process and the release of relevant information to the public.

On 5 December, a 14-page version of the strategic environmental-impact assessment report, conducted by the Chinese Research Academy of Environmental Sciences, was released on Xiamen Net, the government's official website. The report criticized the Xianglu and Dragon Group's repeated emissions breaches and their disregard of requests since 2003 from the local environmental protection bureau to tackle the problems. Although it was less concerned about the environmental effects of the plant, the report pointed out serious flaws in a development scheme for Haicang that was pursuing the conflicting goals of industrialization and urbanization in such a small region. The plant may now be moved to Zhangzhou.

The relocation is the latest incident in which China's environmental problems have catalysed a democratic movement where the public has challenged the collusion between big business and local governments in their pursuit of economic growth at any cost. ■

Jane Qiu

SCORECARD



Phoning home

Mars explorers should be able to avoid feelings of despair and isolation, thanks to a virtual world similar to Second Life that NASA is planning for participants on 800-day missions to the red planet.



Seasonal goodwill

A Christmas punch-up at a South Pole research station resulted in one staff member being sacked and another being evacuated to hospital. Speculation over the cause ranges from over-imbibing to a woman to sheer isolation.

ZOO NEWS

It's raining reptiles

A cold snap in Florida has prompted a shower of iguanas. The cold-blooded creatures have been raining out of the trees they call home as evening temperatures drop and render them immobile. Locals report that many of the lizards "come back to life" if they are placed in the sun. Wildlife managers say they are pleased the invasive pests are being knocked out of action.

NUMBER CRUNCH

173 metres is the height of SOLAÉ, Mitsubishi Electric's record-breaking elevator testing tower (pictured), which opens later this month in Japan.

1,000 metres is the height contestants in the 2008 space elevator games will have to reach to claim the US\$2-million prize money.

0 is the number of contestants in the 2007 games who managed that year's target height of 100 metres in the allotted time limit.

Sources: *Wired*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Mitsubishi Electric*, *The Spaceward Foundation*, *Miami Herald*

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