

## **China losing battle against pollution, Tibet is next<sup>1</sup>**

Do you know why the Chinese love Tibet so much?

It is simple, they breathe better on the Roof of the World.

Scientific research conducted by the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Research Institute of China Academy of Sciences shows that the air quality of the Namtso Lake situated in southern Tibet, east of Lhasa is as good as that of Antarctica.

It is not the case in China, particularly in Beijing.

The sky created havoc for the Chinese citizens at the end of the long Mid-Autumn Festival Holiday.

Xinhua reported that Beijing had to close down expressways and airports, preventing the return of holiday goers at the end of the Golden Week. In Beijing, visibility was less than 1,000 meters in the city and even lower in the suburbs.

On October 6, Beijing traffic police closed six interprovincial expressways, including roads to Harbin in the northeast, Shanghai to the south, Tianjin and Hebei Province.

Xinhua said: "Visibility at Beijing's Capital International Airport on the northeastern outskirts was 250 to 500 meters. Nearly 44 percent of the departing flights were delayed or canceled, and dozens of incoming flights were forced to land in neighboring cities or return to where they came."

On the last day of China's National Holiday week, the smog forced lakhs of citizens to postpone their return.

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<sup>1</sup> Published in ***Niti Central*** on **October 8, 2013** (URL not available)

The Beijing Municipal Environmental Monitoring Center frankly admitted that on October 6, early in the morning: "all 35 monitoring centers across the city indicated heavy air pollution at the highest level of six. ...the density of PM 2.5 (airborne particles of less than 2.5 microns), exceeded 200 micrograms per cubic meter."

The weather forecast said that heavy fog would persist for a few days in the provinces of Hebei, Henan, Shaanxi, Shanxi, Shandong and Tianjin.

Worse, the atmospheric condition kept pollutants in the air. The US embassy announced that the air quality indexes "have averaged over 300 in the 24-hour period beginning at 8 pm on October 4, and were over 400 overnight". The embassy uses the norms of the US Environmental Protection Agency to monitor the pollution; if the index level goes above 301, it is considered hazardous, 'all physical activities outdoors' should be avoided.

Well, there were some outdoors activities around the Chinese capital.

As Bloomberg commented: "This weekend, the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) demonstrated its willingness to sacrifice player safety for its own long-term financial health."

In China as elsewhere, sport is business! The Reignwood Classic being the first LPGA tournament in China, the show had to go on. It was too important an event for the association which is banking on China's rapidly expanding golf market.

American Jessica Korda told the financial publication: "The smog that's coming in right now, it's making it heavy, and it's harder to breathe out there. You cough a lot."

Players and caddies were seen wearing face-masks in a smoggy backdrop. Finally, the final round of the Reignwood tournament had to be rescheduled,

“due to low visibility, the start of the final round has been delayed by 90 minutes.”

During the week-long National Day holiday, millions of visitors landed in the capital, more than 1.1 million visitors on October 3 alone. The tourists from outside could experience a phenomenon familiar to the Beijingers. Visiting Beijing, a Weibo blogger wrote: “My nose and throat are protesting due to the heavy pollution over the past two days. People who dare to travel to Beijing must be from the death squad.”

The biggest attraction in Beijing during the Mid-Autumn Festival Holiday was the newly arrived Big Yellow Duck by Florentijn Hofman, a Dutch artist. It attracted over 300,000 visitors to Beijing’s Summer Palace, though many clicked only blurred images of the Duck.

In the midst of the holidays, the Chinese Government announced that it will ban new coal-fired power plants in three key industrial regions around Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou in order to combat air pollution.

The State Council, China’s Cabinet, decided to cut coal’s share of the country’s total primary energy use to below 65 percent by 2017 and increase the share of nuclear power, natural gas and renewable energy.

The State Council admitted the country’s air pollution level was ‘grim’ and was ‘harming people’s health and affecting social harmony and stability’. ‘Affecting stability’ will force the Government to move fast. Beijing would now like to cut the density of fine particle matter in Beijing by 25 percent by 2017 (from 2012 levels) and by at least 10 percent in other big cities.

Martin Adams, the Hong Kong-based energy editor for the *Economist Intelligence Unit* commented on the Government decision: “I think possibly, just as important, if not more important, is the signal that it sends to the

Chinese people that 'we are trying to control pollution levels on the eastern seaboard'."

The moral of the story is that there is no free meal, even in Communist China where 'development' has occurred at a break-neck pace for the past 3 decades. The Middle Kingdom is today paying the price for this rapid development.

Is India watching? Could the great planners in Delhi learn a lesson from what is happening in the Middle Kingdom? Probably not! 'Development' at any cost is still the motto of these 'Planners'.

In the meantime, Cong Zhiyuan, researcher of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Research Institute of China Academy of Sciences explains that the area around the Namtso Lake is one of the cleanest on the globe.

The Chinese loves to walk around the blue waters of the lake.

Chen Quanguo, the Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region vowed to protect the world's last 'pure land'. He said that environmental considerations should be at the heart of Tibet's development to protect the region's forests, grasslands, mountains and rivers, adding: "Projects with high energy consumption, pollution and emissions will be strictly banned and mineral resource development will undergo environmental assessment procedures."

But Mr. Chen has invited 15 million Chinese tourists on the Roof of the World, while mining companies continue to loot the mineral wealth of region. Does not Mr. Chen realize tourism and mining are two of the most polluting activities?

There is no doubt the Tibet will soon follow the steps of the Mainland. How long will Chinese tourists continue to breathe freely and deeply on the Roof of the World? A few years perhaps, not more. Isn't tragic?