

Drivers' behavior taxing for those caught in storms

By ZHENG XIN
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The capital will crack down on taxi drivers who overcharge and refuse to take passengers, occurrences that stirred up public discontent during the recent mayhem caused by heavy rains, authorities said.

More frequent investigations and supervision will be conducted on the city's taxi industry in case drivers break regulations, according to the municipal government's micro blog on Sunday, a move that comes in response to frequent complaints from commuters.

People can call 010-6835-1150 or 010-6835-1570 to lodge a complaint, the authority said.

The Beijing Municipal Commission of Transport will also arrange for more taxis in key areas such as the airport and railway stations to ensure no one is stuck on the road.

With the downpours that have hit the capital since July 21, frequent complaints have arisen from commuters over taxis overcharging on rainy days, especially at the airport, railway stations, public transport hubs and downtown areas.

Li Yang, a teacher in Beijing, was charged 100 yuan (\$15.70) from Sanyuanqiao to the Wangjing area on Friday, when it was raining, according to her micro blog. Normally the fare



Passengers wait in line to take taxis at the Beijing Capital International Airport on July 25.

ZHANG LI MINGZHU / FOR CHINA DAILY

would be 15 yuan.

After Li and her husband tried to take a picture of the license plate to make a complaint later, the driver walked out of the taxi and punched her husband in the face. "I was very scared," she said.

However, there are also some drivers who voluntarily went behind the wheel to help out.

To assist air passengers whose flights were canceled and could

not find a taxi, a group of drivers offered free rides back from the Beijing Capital International Airport on July 21 when the mayhem hit the capital.

Wang Lu, 28, from the Wangjing area, about 15 kilometers from the airport, organized 20 volunteers and picked up more than 500 passengers from the airport.

In response to public criticism

and queries, some taxi drivers found themselves wronged.

According to Dou Keying, a taxi driver in the capital, driving on rainy days for hours without a break is extremely dangerous, and one moment of distraction might lead to a catastrophe.

"I guess those drivers who overcharge might find their efforts worth the price, since once the car is broken or damaged, they have

to pay for all the expenses themselves, sometimes with a whole month's salary," said Dou.

However, as overcharging or refusing to take passengers is not allowed, people who encounter such circumstances should turn to the company or the commission of transport to protect their rights, he said.

Ji Jin contributed to this story.

Netizens band together in search for missing men

By LI YAO
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Three men who disappeared during a self-driving tour of Tibet have sparked searches both on land and online, as desperate family and friends use social media in an attempt to find them.

Huang Yan traveled to Tibet with two friends for a pilgrimage to pray for his mother, who is suffering from late-stage lung cancer. Huang and his friends Liu Ke and Wan Xubo set off from Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province, on July 20, but have not been in contact with anyone since July 26.

Huang's wife, Ding Jie, is three months pregnant and kept in touch with her husband through regular phone calls and his micro blog. Huang's last entry was posted at midnight on July 26, and stated he felt drowsy, was short of breath and had some chest discomfort after driving past a mountain with an altitude of 5 kilometers.

Ding turned to her micro blog to ask for help to search for her husband and his friends on Sunday afternoon, and was quickly inundated with sympathy and support from thousands of netizens.

Within hours of posting the entry, people close to Bomi county, where Huang's mobile phone was last active, and Nyingchi county, where he made several calls to book hotels, went to vehicle checkpoints to gather information about the car, a silver Pajero, and to hospitals, in case the man had been treated for altitude sickness.

Police in Bomi learned of the case on Monday, and with information from telecommunication operators, they were able to send a team to the location where the mobile phone was last used.

A police officer in Bomi said the station had responded to several similar cases. On rainy days, the mudslides may make the roads in the area dangerous, but the station had received fewer distress calls in the recent string of sunny days.

Despite the efforts of netizens and the police, there is no new information as to the men's whereabouts.

A micro blog account managed by the Ministry of Public Security promised to post any information from police relating to the men's whereabouts.

Ding Jie's father, brother and two others flew to Nyingchi on Tuesday to help with the search efforts.

Ding said she is "stable". She said she would have accompanied her husband on the trip if she were not pregnant. She wanted him to take the trip, because they would be too busy after the baby is born.

Huang Yan's employer, an electric appliance seller, which is headquartered in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, has

asked its employees to disseminate the news and help find useful information.

Wang Bo, Huang's colleague, was the first in the company to notice the online plea for help and quickly notified corporate leadership.

Responses have poured in from self-driving tourism associations, hotel owners and Internet users living close to where the three men were last contacted or were planning to head to, Wang said.

Two self-driving groups, one from Nanjing, the other from Beijing, are now touring Tibet and will be on the lookout for the three missing men.

Wang had been to Tibet once on a self-driving trip in 2005. Mobile phone signals were sometimes so weak that he was unable to contact his family for two or three days, he said.

"They probably met with the same problem and have lost contact. I am confident that they are stranded somewhere and are admiring the landscape," Wang said.

According to Wang, Huang and his friends took a standard route to drive across Tibet, but they may have faced altitude sickness, possible car accidents or natural disasters such as mudslides.

Wang said people interested in driving through Tibet should take two cars so they can assist each other in case of emergencies. He also said they should practice by driving to less-challenging places first.

Da Qiong in Lhasa contributed to this story.

Illegal taxis in Shanghai facing crackdown

By ZHOU WENTING
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A brigade of secret investigators will be established to deal with illegal cabs in Shanghai, according to a senior transport official in the municipality.

The team will facilitate obtaining evidence to identify illegal taxis and help crack down on the proliferation of them in the market, said Yang Xiaoxi, deputy head of the Shanghai Municipal Transport and Port Authority.

The brigade will draw experiences from Hong Kong, he said, which means the law enforcement officials gather evidence disguised as passengers after receiving reports of illegal cabs from residents.

Some strict requirements will standardize the operation, he

said. "For example, law enforcers must go in pairs, and audio and video recordings must be taken."

Yang stressed they will ban the practice of entrapment after the government issued codes of conduct for law enforcers in 2010, which forbid all improper means, including inducement, deception and coercion, when investigating and collecting evidence of unlicensed taxi operation.

The document was enacted after several incidents of entrapment raised public concern in recent years.

Zhang Hui, a resident of Shanghai's Minhang district, was identified as an illegal cab driver and was fined 10,000 yuan (\$1,570) when he gave a ride to a man who claimed he was suffering a stomachache and rushed to a hospital in

September 2009.

Believing in the lack of a legal basis for the fine and the law enforcers' violation of law, Zhang filed a lawsuit, which declared the method of obtaining evidence in the case was improper and led to a false judgment.

Sun Zhongjie, from Henan province, cut off the little finger of his left hand in October 2009 to protest an alleged trap after he was accused of being engaged in the taxi business without a license in Pudong New Area.

The driver insisted the law enforcer, who pretended to be a passenger, got into the car before Sun approved, and he did not ask for a fare.

"We are all afraid of being hooked," said Cao Bo, a 44-year-old taxi driver. "And in addition to a secret investigation, there

are other effective approaches to chop the illegal market."

Some traffic police stopped cars in the name of detecting drunken driving, and asked the driver and the passenger to give each other their names.

"If they fail to give answers consistently, there may be a chance the car is illegally operating," said Cao.

Taxi drivers had expected the crackdowns on illegal cabs would be stronger, especially in uptown districts.

"Unlicensed cabs are ubiquitous in the municipality, and they are severely harming our business," said a 58-year-old taxi driver named Xie.

Wang Xiaodong, an unlicensed cab driver, said that actually, the law enforcers and the illegal operators are quite familiar with each other's practices.

Desertification threatens Qinghai-Tibet Railway

By XINHUA in Xining

China's Qinghai-Tibet Railway, the world's highest rail system, is being threatened by desertification on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau as a result of global warming, experts concluded after conducting a probe.

About 443 km of the 1,956-km railway are in areas affected by desertification, including 103 km that lie in seriously desertified areas, Wang Jinchang, a senior engineer with the Qinghai-Tibet Railway Co, said on Monday.

Wang cited research showing that the threat of soil erosion grew very fast in recent years, mostly near rivers and wetland from Golmud and Lhasa, and the amount of affected track almost doubled from 2003 to 2009.

Touted the "Road to Heaven", half of the Qinghai-Tibet Railway was built on areas at an elevation of about 4,000 meters, crossing mountains, ravines, the Gobi Desert and frozen earth, among other hostile environments.

An Fengjie, an official with China's State Forestry Admin-

istration who specializes in soil erosion control, said the plateau region suffered from desertification long before the railway was built.

"The railway did not cause the problem, but it gives us an opportunity to witness the severity and scale of soil erosion on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau," An said.

Sands buried tracks and disrupted train services more than 1,362 times from 1984 to 2002 on the Xining-Golmud section of the railway, which has been operating since 1984. The main part, the Golmud-Lhasa section, went into operation in 2006.

Since becoming fully operational, the railway has transported 52.76 million passengers, according to the railway company's estimate this month. Work has begun to expand the railway from Lhasa to Xigaze, a historical Tibetan city and home to the Panchen Lamas.

Engineers set up barrier walls or simply placed big rocks along the tracks in affected areas to prevent sands from encroaching on the rails.

"These emergency control measures have been effective, but we still need to address the root problems of desertification," An said.

One of the most prevalent theories blames global warming for ecological deterioration in the plateau region.

Sun Zhizhong, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Sciences, said temperatures on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau rose by more than 2 C on average over the past three years, leaving large chunks of frozen earth to defrosting.

The moisture is soon lost, however, as water quickly evaporates under the plateau's blazing sun. The soil begins to dry up and eventually becomes desert, Sun explained.

He said overgrazing is another concern.

"Lab results tell us that desertification is a trend that will be hard to reverse in the near future. The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau may one day become a major source of sandstorms," said Qu Jianjun, another researcher with the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Qu said glaciers are also melting quickly on the plateau. More than 200 small glaciers in the region have disappeared over the past five decades. Lakes in the heart of the Hoh Xil Nature Reserve, home to 70,000 Tibetan antelopes in remote western Qinghai, have become swollen as a result of melting glaciers and snow.

Xiao Penghu, deputy chief of the nature reserve administration, described melting glaciers as "a hanging dagger".

He said that after most glaciers melt away, the lakes and rivers in the Hoh Xil region will start to dry out, resulting in "disastrous" consequences for the local ecology.

"The fate of the Tibetan antelopes is in our hands, because our actions set the pace of global warming," said Tseten, another official with the nature reserve, calling for people around the world to unite to fight climate change.

"Once global warming wipes out (Tibetan antelopes), we'll eventually be wiped out as well," he said.



GALLOPING IN THE HIGH LAND

PHOTO BY LIU KUN / XINHUA

Riders in traditional costume attend a horse race to celebrate the Ongkor Festival in Quxu county, the Tibet autonomous region, on Monday. As one of the traditional Tibetan festivals, the Ongkor Festival has a history of at least 1,000 years.