

“The booming business for these flowers must have triggered mass cuttings, which is devastating for these beautiful flowers.”

Zhu Ning, professor at Northeast Forestry University, talking about online sales of wild rhododendrons

5 killed in residential explosions

Gas suspected as dual blasts destroy building; 259 people are resettled

By YUAN HUI in Hohhot and HOU LIQIANG in Beijing

Five people were killed and another 25 were injured in two powerful explosions that ripped through an apartment building in North China's Inner Mongolia autonomous region on Saturday.

The blasts happened at around 2 pm in a multistory residential building, which was connected to two others, in the Xiangyang residential community in Tumd Right Banner, Baotou city.

The local government first reported the death toll at three during a news conference on Saturday evening, but said the number had increased to five in a Sunday morning update. Among the injured, four were in critical condition.

The rescue effort has now ended, the government said on Sunday.

The latest two victims were dead when they were found by searchers combing the rubble. According to China Central Television, one of the two bodies was found with the help of sniffer dogs and electronic instruments on Saturday evening.

Rubble around the victim was moved with an excavator. The body was found at around 6 am on Sunday.

Teams of experts on electrical power, water, fire control, work safety and the environment arrived at the scene on Saturday to help prevent any secondary disaster, the officials said.

Weather complicated the search and rescue effort,

with snow falling on Saturday evening.

The explosions caused the middle of the three connected buildings in the complex to collapse. The other two buildings were also damaged, as were vehicles parked in the area. A total of 83 homes were damaged, and 259 people have been resettled, the government said.

According to Xinhua News Agency, the building in which the blast occurred had virtually disappeared. Windows in the adjacent buildings were shattered.

"My son, daughter-in-law and I were all injured," a woman surnamed Li told China News Agency at a local hospital. The family lived in an apartment building opposite the explosion.

"I heard two loud explosions. One of the windows of my home and the burglar-proof door were displaced. I was shocked," she said.

The owner of a nearby shop witnessed the aftermath of the explosions.

"Some residents escaped from the building with slight injuries after the first explosion," the person said. "After the second blast a few minutes later, I saw some more residents come out, and they were covered with blood."

Earlier reports indicated that the explosion might have originated in the building's natural gas piping system, but the government said the cause is still being investigated.

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An aerial photo of the residential buildings damaged in dual blasts in Baotou, Inner Mongolia autonomous region, on Saturday. LIAN ZHEN / XINHUA

Up, up and away



Team members pull a large kite into the air at the qualifying round of the 13th World Kite Championship in Tongren, Guizhou province, on Saturday. More than 100 teams, including 34 from overseas, participated in the two-day event. NING JIAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

Sales of wildflowers to be curbed

By TIAN XUEFEI in Harbin and ZHENG JINRAN in Beijing

A prefecture government in Northeast China has threatened heavy fines for people who illegally harvest and sell wild rhododendrons after a surge in online sales led to a large number of the flowers being cut or pulled up.

Azaleas, which are well-known in China, are one species of rhododendron.

Almost 200 stores sell rhododendron cuttings on Taobao, an online marketplace, with prices for a small bundle ranging from 10 to 30 yuan (\$1.50 to \$4).

The cuttings produce purple petals and flower for up to four weeks when placed in water, according to descriptions by vendors. Some even claim rhododendrons have air-purifying qualities.

A newspaper in Heilongjiang province's Daxing'anling prefecture, where many of the flowers originate, reported that one Taobao shop alone

had sold more than 190,000 cuttings in a single month this year.

However, the rush to harvest the wildflowers has resulted in scenes of devastation. Footage shared on social media showed a road in Daxing'anling carpeted with discarded cuttings, with many pulled up by the roots.

The prefecture government has released regulations to step up inspections on areas where the flowers grow, and highlighted penalties for people who illegally harvest or sell them.

"We have noticed the mass illegal cutting of wild rhododendron flowers to be sold online this year and we have taken strict measures to tackle the problem," said Lyu Jianzhao, a government spokesman.

Lyu said a local ban has been placed on mailing rhododendron cuttings, while teams from the environmental protection, forestry and commerce authorities will be sent to check local stores that stock them.



Mass cuttings of wild rhododendrons is devastating in Daxing'anling, Heilongjiang province, an expert said. LIU ZHAOMING / FOR CHINA DAILY

Offenders will be fined up to 10 times the amount they make from selling the plants, Lyu said, adding that no penalties had been issued so far.

Zhu Ning, a professor at Northeast Forestry University, said wild rhododendrons grow about 10 centimeters a

year and cannot recover quickly from being chopped down en masse.

"The booming business for these flowers must have triggered mass cutting, which is devastating for these beautiful flowers. There should be strict controls to stop the harvesting and selling before it's too late," Zhu said.

Although wild rhododendrons are not included in the national list of protected species, any exploitation of them needs approval from the authorities, according to Zhang Shusen, head of wild animal and plant protection at the Heilongjiang Forestry and Industry Bureau.

A spokesman for Taobao, who did not want to be identified, said that without protected status it is hard to control online sales of wild rhododendrons. However, he added, the company will look into introducing measures soon.

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2,566 economic fugitives captured

China captured 2,566 economic fugitives who had fled to more than 90 countries and regions, and recovered 8.6 billion yuan (\$1.25 billion) during its Sky Net manhunt from 2014 to last year.

Of those, 1,283 turned themselves in or were persuaded to return to China, according to a statement issued on Saturday by the

central anti-graft coordination group's office in charge of fugitives.

A total of 410 had been members of the Communist Party of China or official staff, according to the statement. So far, 39 of China's 100 most-wanted have returned, voluntarily or otherwise.

The campaign has effectively stopped corrupt offi-

cials from fleeing overseas, the statement said. The number of those who fled abroad dropped significantly over the period, from 101 in 2014 to 19 last year.

According to another statement by the Ministry of Public Security on Saturday, the Fox Hunt campaign, an important part of Sky Net, netted 951 fugitives suspected

of economic offenses from 72 countries and regions last year.

Police nationwide have worked with the People's Bank of China to solve 380 cases of underground banks and money laundering, closing more than 500 underground banks.

XINHUA

Soccer hopefuls get some German tutelage

By XIE CHUANJIAO in Qingdao, Shandong xiechuanjiao@chinadaily.com.cn

Dozens of young Chinese soccer players put on their boots over the weekend for a shot at representing the country at this year's FC Bayern Youth Cup finals.

Germany's top professional club, FC Bayern Munich, held a trial for 60 hopefuls aged 14 to 16 at a training ground in Qingdao, Shandong province, on Saturday.

The 10 best performers will be selected to play for China against their peers from

around the world in the youth tournament, said Julian Heichele, the club's international marketing manager.

The tournament, launched in 2012, is played at Bayern's Allianz Arena and will feature teams from Thailand, the United States, India, Austria, Singapore and Germany. Games will be played from May 17 to 21.

"Players will also participate in training sessions with our youth coaches, meet the first-team players and watch the final match of the 2016-17 Bundesliga season at the Allianz Arena," Heichele said.

The 60 players, who come from eight provincial regions, were watched by Antonio Vatan, a Bayern youth coach who will make suggestions on the final selection.

The trials were held at the Sino-German Ecopark, where the Bundesliga club's first soccer school in China is located. The school opened in October and boasts world-class facilities.

"It's a unique experience for China's excellent young soccer players to gain access to top-level training sessions through this event to boost their skills," said Yu Hao,

chairman of Qingdao Sino-German Sports Culture Co Ltd, which is affiliated to the park.

"We will enhance cooperation with Bayern to introduce its advanced youth training system to the park and continue to optimize training facilities," Yu said. "Construction of two 11-a-side pitches is underway, while a German-style soccer park and medical facilities will also be completed soon."

Bayern's soccer school in Qingdao is expected to finish registration and officially begin operations next month.

Mass marriage



Couples in Han-style gowns participate in a group wedding in Xiangyang, Hubei province, on Sunday. A total of 99 couples tied the knot at the event. YANG DONG / XINHUA

Briefly

BEIJING Billions targeted at housing renovation

Beijing will spend 30.8 billion yuan (\$4.5 billion) on renovating substandard urban houses this year, the government said on Sunday. The budget is 60 percent more than last year. Around 36,000 homes in rundown areas, including four traditional *hutong* around the Nanluoguxiang tourist site, will be targeted this year. According to the Beijing Municipal Commission of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, the renovation is part of Beijing's efforts to build a world-class livable city.

GUANGDONG Power plant collapse claims nine lives

Nine people died and two were injured when a platform collapsed at a power plant in Guangzhou on Saturday, local authorities said. The accident happened about 8 am at No 7 Thermal Power Plant, said Li Chibin, deputy chief of the work safety administration of Conghua district. He said 10 workers were working on the 40-meter-high platform when it gave way. The power plant, located in Conghua, is still under construction and is expected to begin operations in May.

HENAN 11 dead in gold mine accidents

A pair of accidents at two neighboring gold mines in Henan province killed a total of 11 people on Friday, local authorities said on Saturday. Thick smoke engulfed a pit at China National Gold Group's Qinling gold mine in Lingbao at 10:36 am, trapping 18 people, the city government said in a statement. Rescuers had retrieved eight bodies by Saturday afternoon. Of the 10 people who were found and sent to the hospital, one died after medical treatment failed. Two other miners were killed in a similar accident in a neighboring gold mine at 3 pm on Friday, the provincial work safety administration said.

TIBET Flights revved up for tourism season

Chinese airlines on Sunday prepared to increase flights to the Tibet autonomous region ahead of the annual tourist high season of summer and fall. Tibet is linked to 30 domestic and foreign destinations, including Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Kathmandu, by regular passenger air routes. Flights are suspended or reduced in winter as demand drops along with the plateau's temperature. The airlines will follow the peak-season schedule until Oct 28. More than 23 million tourists visited Tibet in 2016, up 15 percent year-on-year.

TAIWAN Island reports new outbreak of bird flu

Taiwan has confirmed a new outbreak of bird flu at two poultry farms and culled more than 14,000 birds to prevent further infection, according to animal inspection authorities. Ducks at a farm in Pingdong county were confirmed to have the H5N2 virus, and more than 6,000 were culled. A chicken farm in Tainan city also reported an outbreak of an H5-type virus on Saturday, and more than 8,000 chicken were slaughtered. Farms on the island have reported more than 15 avian flu cases this year.

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