

POLLUTION



Clockwise: Passengers are trapped at Beijing Capital International Airport's Terminal 2 after flights are canceled or delayed due to smog on Tuesday. FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY Overseas tourists visit Tiantan Park in Beijing on Tuesday. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY A teacher at Beijing No 2 Middle School gives an online class on Tuesday as schools in the city have been ordered to suspend classes from Monday to Wednesday. WANG ZHUANGFEI / CHINA DAILY A cyclist wearing a mask passes in front of Tian'anmen in downtown Beijing on Tuesday. JIANG DONG / CHINA DAILY

Haze: Steel price linked to production rise

FROM PAGE 1

second half of the year saw a rapid increase in production. The trend could be seen "especially in southern cities of Hebei province and northern parts of Henan province", said Dong Liansai, the environmental group's head of air pollution research, who added that a similar trend was also seen at cement factories. No regional data was available, but according to the National Bureau of Statistics, steel production nationwide increased by 1.7 percent year-on-year in November. According to Wang Guo-

qing, director of the Lange Steel Information Center, an independent consultancy in Beijing, the price hike meant larger profits for Chinese steel companies, with profits growing by 310 percent in the first 10 months compared with the same period last year. She said production restrictions introduced by governments, such as the red alerts, and increasing costs of raw materials and logistics had driven the steel price higher. Both Dong and Wang said the increase in emissions from the boost in production was a likely contributor to the severe

smog in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. Although the situation was improving, air pollution has been a frequent issue during the period when northern regions fire up central heating systems, generally from Nov 15 to March 15. In addition to industrial emissions, researchers and government officials agree that the heavy reliance on coal consumption in northern regions is another major reason for the frequent air pollution. Meteorological conditions also play a part. A lack of wind, for example, means the

pollution lingers. According to the Ministry of Environmental Protection, authorities in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region have taken joint steps to reduce air pollution and bring more blue sky days. However, efforts to punish companies that violate restrictions on production are still being refined. Ma Yong, an environmental researcher with the Supreme People's Court Law Center, said, "To cut emissions, there should be tougher punishments to deter companies violating the restrictions, making fines higher than their potential profits."

Shijiazhuang suspends classes due to smog

By ZHANG YU in Shijiazhuang zhangyu1@chinadaily.com.cn

Shijiazhuang in Hebei province ordered schools to suspend classes on Wednesday due to persistent smog that has haunted the city for five consecutive days. The order mainly affects primary schools and kindergartens inside the city. Other schools in suburban counties are to decide whether to suspend classes based on local air conditions, according to a notice released on Tuesday by the Shijiazhuang Bureau of Education. Shijiazhuang has suffered almost 10 rounds of severe smog this winter, with its Air Quality Index frequently exceeding 500, the most hazardous level. For November, it's the city with the worst air quality among 74 major cities moni-

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tored by the Ministry of Environmental Protection. Severe smog also hit other cities in North, Central and East China on Friday last week and was forecast to persist and get worse on Wednesday. As of Sunday, more than 20 cities, including Beijing and cities in Hebei, had issued red alerts, the most serious level for air pollution. As of Tuesday, many cities, including Tianjin, had issued orange alerts, the second-most serious level. Beijing, Tianjin and two other cities in Hebei — Langfang and Hengshui — also

ordered schools to stop classes, some from Tuesday to Wednesday, with others just for Tuesday. Other cities in Hebei didn't take similar moves, leaving netizens questioning why students still have to go to school during such bad weather. "It's a hard decision to make, because complications will follow after schools are suspended," said Zhou Huijie, a publicity worker at the educational bureau of Jinzhou, a small city under the administration of Shijiazhuang. In many cases, parents or

adults cannot be at home to take care of young students during weekdays, according to Zhou. Zhao Jingru, head of Jinhe Kindergarten in Shijiazhuang, said she preferred for schools not to be ordered or forced to suspend classes. "If parents or other relatives could take care of the children during work days, they could ask for leave," said Zhao, adding that sending children to school would spare a lot of trouble for families without adults at home during the day. Zhao said different schools can take various measures, such as stopping outside activities or stopping new lessons, when many students are away. "Despite such bad air, there is not much difference between children staying at home or staying in classrooms," she said.

ENVIRONMENT

Medical waste turned into tableware, toys

By CANG WEI in Nanjing cangwei@chinadaily.com.cn

Police in Nanjing, Jiangsu province, arrested three suspects who allegedly traded thousands of tons of medical waste that was later processed into disposable tableware and fake brand-name toys. Nanjing police in August received reports from residents that piles of medical waste were stored at a dump site near Gujia village, including used needles, glass bottles and infusion tubes. They later found that the three suspects had sold more than 3,000 metric tons of medical waste, which they had collected from hospitals in Nanjing since the beginning of 2012. They earned more than 40 million yuan (\$5.8 million) from selling the waste.



Large piles of medical waste sit at a dump site near Gujia village in Nanjing. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The suspects paid each hospital 800 to 1,000 yuan per month to collect their waste, while some large hospitals produced more than 10 metric tons of waste. Then they hired workers to classify the waste, compressed the disposable plastic infusion bags and bottles, and finally smashed them into plastic particles. The suspects confessed that

the plastic particles were sold to many plastic product factories across the country for 2,200 to 2,800 yuan per metric ton, the police said. "China only allows authorized companies specializing in medical waste to engage in such business," said a policeman surnamed Qi. "Trained workers, specialized containers and transportation vehicles are required before medical waste is burned and buried in certain sites." To monitor the medical waste treatment, Nanjing Health Inspection Bureau said in August that medical waste should be classified and sent to special treatment agencies, and that the waste cannot be treated by unauthorized groups. According to police, high profits drove the suspects and the hospitals to violate the

treatment regulations. The suspects could earn more than 20,000 yuan from the waste produced by one large hospital every month. Compared with using specialized treatment companies, which charge to treat medical waste, a hospital producing 10 metric tons of medical waste could save more than 500,000 yuan a year through illegal disposal of such waste. The suspects have been prosecuted for crimes of environmental pollution. Zhou Lin, a lawyer with Yicheng Law Firm in Jiangsu, said that according to criminal law, those who severely pollute the environment can receive up to three years in prison, while those causing extreme damage can be sentenced to between three and seven years in prison plus a fine.

DEVELOPMENT

Investment helps 10 million people rise from poverty

Government spends 100 billion yuan this year, registers poor households for living allowances

By CHEN MENGWEI chenmengwei@chinadaily.com.cn

8.07 million

new names were registered as being eligible for help.

China has lifted more than 10 million rural residents out of poverty this year with a record-breaking investment of 100 billion yuan (\$14.4 billion) in government funds, and it plans to pull another 10 million people out of poverty next year.

That goal was announced on Tuesday by Liu Yongfu, director of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development, at the office's annual national meeting. By the end of 2015, China still had more than 55 million people living below the national poverty line of 2,800 yuan per person per year, or income of less than 8 yuan a day, according to the office. President Xi Jinping said during the G20 Leaders Summit in Hangzhou in September that the Chinese government will lift the entire nation out of poverty by 2020. This year, the central government allocated 66.7 billion yuan to tackle poverty, a

43.4 percent increase compared with last year. Local governments together designated more than 40 billion yuan for the same purpose, up more than 50 percent compared with 2015, Liu said. Unlike the previous practice of most special funds being spent by higher-level governments, these funds have filtered down to the grassroots level. More than 95 percent of funding is directly accessible by county governments, up from last year's 75 percent, Liu said. The government has organized 2 million people to check the status of every poor household registered nationwide to make sure that each person in need can get help — a key idea behind the ongoing anti-poverty campaign. As a result, they removed 9.29 million names of those who are not really poor, while

adding the names of 8.07 million others who were previously not registered, according to the office. By 2015, there were 1,521 counties where villagers were unable to qualify for a basic living allowance even if they earned less than 2,800 yuan per year. This year, that number dropped to 887, after the central government issued a circular requiring that every rural resident under the national poverty line have access to a basic living allowance, Liu said. Earlier this year, 51 central government-owned enterprises jointly established an industrial investment fund of 12.2 billion yuan to boost business in poor regions. That fund is expected to expand to 100 billion yuan in the near future. Meanwhile, a total of 21,992 private companies have pledged to help 21,251 registered poor villages. Among them, property developers made significant commitments. The Evergrande Group has set up a fund of 1 billion yuan to help Guizhou province's Dafang county, while Wanda Group plans to invest another 1.4 billion yuan in the province's Danzhai county, according to the office.

TELECOM FRAUD

Crimes to be punished severely

By CAO YIN caoyin@chinadaily.com.cn

Telecom and online fraudsters will face heavier punishments if their behavior causes death or long-term mental distress, according to a new judicial guideline. The guideline, released on Tuesday by the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme People's Procuratorate and the Ministry of Public Security, stipulates that telecom and online swindlers should be given heavier penalties under 10 circumstances, including causing the death of a victim, cheating the disabled or the elderly, or defrauding by pretending to be legal officials. "The guideline aims to step up punishments for defrauders or people with such intentions, as the number of cases of telecom and online scams has soared in the past few years," said Li Ruiyi, deputy judge of the top court's No 3 Criminal Tribunal. From January to November, China uncovered 93,000 cases of telecom and online fraud, catching 52,000 offenders, Li said, adding that both figures had doubled year-on-year. "Of greater concern is that some telecom scams did not only swindle victims out of money, but also cost them their lives," he said. In August, Xu Yuyu, an 18-year-old from Linyi, Shandong province, died of a heart attack after losing 9,900 yuan (\$1,500) in a



Seventy-four suspects are brought back to Wuhan, Hubei province, in November after Chinese and Malaysian police cracked a telecom fraud case. XU WEIWEI/FOR CHINA DAILY

phone scam. The money had been intended to cover her college tuition fees. Song Zhenning, a college student in the same province, also died of cardiac arrest in August five days after he was swindled out of 2,000 yuan. "The money was intended to cover the victims' tuition, medical and basic living costs. They shouldered both an economic and mental burden," he said, adding that the guideline is to ensure such tragedies are avoided. Meanwhile, the guideline, effective since Tuesday, unifies a national standard on the definition of fraud amounts. "Previously, we provided a range for grassroots courts to define how much was considered a 'huge' or 'relatively large' amount, because the economy develops unevenly in different areas," Song said. But now, in a fraud case,

3,000 yuan or more is defined as a "relatively large amount", while 30,000 yuan or more is defined as a "huge amount", according to the guideline. Under Chinese Criminal Law, the most severe punishment given to defrauders will be life imprisonment, if the amount of money in a case is "huge" or their behavior is deemed serious enough for such punishment. Zhou Guangquan, a law professor at Tsinghua University, said: "The more specific the guideline is, the more effective judicial bodies' fight against telecom scams will be." Chen Shiqu, deputy inspector of the ministry's criminal investigation department, praised the unified standard, "because it makes tackling cross-regional telecom scams much more practical."

Other major points in the guideline

- For cases in which judicial bodies find it difficult to establish how much money has been swindled, they can punish fraudsters for sending text message spam more than 5,000 times or making more than 500 prank calls.
- Most telecom scams are gang-related offenses, but in the past, some defrauders escaped punishments due to their undefined roles in such fraud. The guideline states that people providing scam devices or luring others into making payments in calls will be also penalized.
- Judicial bodies will focus on tracing money victims have been cheated out of.
- Members of a fraud gang who surrender themselves, provide clues for judicial bodies and hand over illicit money of their own accord may be given a more lenient punishment.