ISLAND INFRASTRUCTURE DRIVE SET TO MAKE WAVES

China's newest city has just celebrated its third birthday amid a massive construction program designed to raise living standards and attract more maritime businesses. Xu Wei and Huang Yiming report from Sansha, Hainan province.

Yongxing Island has never offered as many business opportunities as it does now, according to Chen Jie, Sansha's mayor.

Construction project manager for Hainan First Construction Engineering Co, Ltd., said the company's business has seen a massive boost in the last three years as a result of an intense infrastructure drive in Sansha, founded in 2012.

With an aircraft carrier-sized fleet of ships, a 50-person team employed on the construction of the island's first primary school, half a dozen mini ships capable of carrying heavy loads, Chen's biggest challenge is simply getting new workers to the island, which is not open to the general public.

"The people who come to the island are mainly fishermen and their relatives, and government employees. It's never easy to get a ticket for the boat," said the Hunan provincial official who has worked on the island for more than 20 years.

Sansha, which administers the island groups around Xisha, Zhongsha and Nansha and the surrounding waters in the South China Sea, celebrated its third birthday in late July. The local authorities are still trying to boost the young city's transportation and infrastructure, and further improve its function as a center of government. A number of projects have also been launched to improve living conditions on Yongxing Island and the neighboring islands.

Chen estimated that the island — part of Hainan, China's southernmost province — is currently home to more than 1,000 construction workers, equal to almost one-fifth of the region's population.

"There were no preconceived notions for infrastructure construction or development when the work we've done has been achieved through trial and error," he said.

Every mainland and fisherfolk used in the construction work has had to be shipped from the mainland, and the buildings must be strong enough to resist the frequent typhoons. Xiao told the two thousand workers, the majority of whom are still being built.

Poor communications

The transportation of cargo and people is a challenge for Hainan. Sansha and the outside world are only linked by two airships, a car and passenger ferry service.

"A few years ago, workers had to stay on Xisha Island, the capital of Hainan, once a month for 15 days. In cool weather, the voyage takes about 10 hours, but heavy waves and strong winds can oftenna about 150 minutes or even the boat for three days," he said.

Fishing is a way of life for the residents of Yongxing Island, as it is for other parts of the world, since the waters surrounding the island are rich in marine resources.

The 33-year-old fisherman who has taken part-time jobs in the food and clothing industries, said the seafood is so fresh that they can eat anything they want.

"I know a little of their dialect, so communication isn't a problem. They are nice people and they recognize the value of my work," he said.

Even though the price of green food is still high, "they can be eaten whenever they want." Food has to be refrigerated for 20 to 30 days until it is sold at regular prices.

"You can see from the blue sky and white clouds that the marine ecosystem is still in good health," he said.

The fishing fleet is an important factor, and the fleet human resource is still small. The journeys are never pleasant. "I'm proud that my work helps to improve their lives," he said.

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