

Natural disasters kill 32 in China in 1st quarter

Natural disasters caused the deaths of 32 people in China in the first quarter of 2017, and another 39 were hospitalized, government statistics showed.

Natural disasters also affected the lives of nearly 1.96 million people, with 16,000 displaced, according to figures released Friday by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Commission for Disaster Reduction.

In addition, over 1,300 houses collapsed and about 4,000 hectares of crops were destroyed.

Authorities estimated economic losses of 1.87 billion yuan (270 million U.S. dollars), but the situation in the first quarter was less serious compared with the same period in the past eight years. Endi

Labour will protect the high street by ending damaging bank closures

Labour will introduce major changes to bank law to prevent banks forcing through closures of vital high-street banks

As part of Labour's plans to rejuvenate the high street and protect local communities, the next Labour Government will make major changes to the banking law that will prevent banks closing their vital high-street branches and damaging local communities and small businesses.

Despite

the introduction of an "Access to Banking Protocol" to prevent closures by this

Conservative Government, the Consumers Association reports that 1,046 local bank branches closed in the UK between December 2015 and January 2017, with another 486 already scheduled for closure this year.

But

the Big four banks made over £1bn profits from their high street banks in 2015, and can afford to provide this vital customer service instead of prioritising cost-saving measures that damage communities and small businesses.

Over

two-thirds of small businesses claim that a local bank branch is important and lending to small businesses has been found to drop by 63 per cent in areas with a recent bank branch closure. For deprived communities and households, loss of a local bank branch significantly diminishes their abilities to access even basic financial services. Older people are significantly less likely to use internet or phone banking services.

Labour believes tougher action is needed on our major banks to prevent them putting their profits first and making short-sighted and damaging decisions. We will replace the toothless Access to Banking Protocol with the force of the law to bring banks into line.

Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, will say:

“High street bank closures have become an epidemic in the last few years, blighting our town centres, hurting particularly elderly and more vulnerable customers, and local small businesses whilst making healthy profits for themselves. It’s time our banks recognise instead that they are a utility providing an essential public service.

“Only Labour will put in place the legal obligations needed to bring banks into line and stand up for our high streets, communities and small businesses.”

Emeritus Professor, Prem Sikka, University of Essex, who advised on the policy, said:

“Banks receive considerable financial support from the public and in return should be required to provide financial infrastructure that meets the needs of individuals and businesses.”

ENDS

Notes:

1. A future Labour government will broaden the duties of the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and amend relevant provisions of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (FSMA), particularly Part 4A of the Act, which authorises banks to carry on the regulated activity (i.e. the ‘banking licence’). These amendments would require banks to accept the conditions laid down below:

a. Prior to the closure of any branch, banks must undertake

a consultation with all customers of the branch which it proposes to close. It must also consult representatives of the relevant local council.

b. The bank must publish details of the reasons for closure, including financial calculations showing the revenues and costs of the relevant branch. The share of central costs (e.g. accounting systems, IT, cyber security, personnel function) allocated to the branch must be separately identified, especially many of these costs are relatively 'fixed' and are not proportionate to the number of branches.

c. The consultation process must be overseen by the FCA, and the FCA must ensure that the closure of the branch does not degrade the local financial infrastructure. The closure of the branch must not make the local community worse-off.

d. The FCA's approval will be needed for any branch closure.

e. Upon approval by FCA, customers and local communities must be given 3 months' notice to enable them to make appropriate arrangements.

2. Labour will amend the statutory objectives, as given at s.9B of the FSMA 2000, of the Financial Policy Committee should include a new objective, the "Consumer Protection Objective", which will oblige the FPC to oversee (i) the accessibility of financial services to geographic communities in the UK, and (ii) the availability of financial services to all sectors of the population.

3. The British Bankers Association found that 68 per cent of small businesses surveyed thought that having a bank branch on the high street was important. See Barty, J and Ricketts, T. (June 2014), *Promoting competition in the UK banking industry*

4. Move Your Money research found that "Before a branch closure, lending for SME's within a given postcode grows from one quarter to the next by 2.13 per cent on average. But after a branch closure in that postcode, average Q-2-Q growth in SME lending drops to only 0.79 per cent – a staggering 63 per cent reduction." Travers-Smith, F. (July 2016), *Abandoned Communities: the crisis of UK bank branch closures and their effects on local communities*

5. The Social Market Foundation found that 11% of the population (7m people) use no other banking service than their local high street branch, and that these are overwhelmingly older and/or poorer. See Evans, K. (January 2016), *Bricks and Clicks: Understanding How Consumers*

Manage Their Money, London: Social Market Foundation

6.

Bank branch closure figures from Goodman, R. (December 2016), "Revealed: 1,000 bank branches shut in two years", *Which?*

7. Banking high street profits given in Travers-Smith, F. (July 2016), *Abandoned Communities: the crisis of UK bank branch closures and their effects on local communities*, p.13

[China SOE watchdog sets up Xiongan working group](#)

The State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC) of the State Council, China's top state-owned enterprises (SOEs) regulator, has announced to establish a special working group to support the construction of Xiongan New Area.

China's centrally administered SOEs are encouraged to make the most of their strengths to map out future development strategies for the area, the SASAC said in a statement released Friday after a meeting gathering its leaders earlier this week.

The economic zone, about 100 kilometers south of Beijing, will cover 2,000 square kilometers in the long term with a population of 2 to 2.5 million.

"The centrally administered SOEs are encouraged to lend strong support to construction of the zone in areas like energy security, infrastructure, electricity, telecommunications, rail transport, ecological protection, information-based network and smart city," noted the statement.

Great support will be given to these central SOEs in locating their newly-registered high-tech, new technology and high-end service businesses into Xiongan New Area, and better coordination between the central SOEs and local authorities will be promoted, it added.

China currently has 102 central SOEs. The plan to set up the new area is a major strategic decision which will open a new era of development.

Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei restricts construction coatings



Heavy smog hits Beijing. [Photo/Xinhua]

To curb air pollution, Hebei Province, Beijing and Tianjin will enforce a unified standard to reduce the use of coatings and adhesives in construction.

According to the standard issued Thursday, the amount of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) must not exceed set levels in manufacturing, storage and in use of construction coatings and adhesives. The measure is estimated to reduce VOCs in the air by 20 percent.

The Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region sits at the heart of the North China Plain where air pollution, particularly winter smog, often occurs as a result of the high concentration of industrial and vehicle emissions, static air circulation and the burning of coal.

“VOCs are a key component of the ozone and PM2.5 – fine particulate matter with diameter smaller than 2.5 micrometers,” said Yu Jianhua, chief engineer of the Beijing Municipal Environmental Protection Bureau.

He said that rapid urbanization had led construction coating and adhesives to constitute a major part of VOCs in cities. In 2015, 5.16 million tonnes of construction coating was consumed nationwide, an eight-fold increase since 2000.

Yu said Beijing had its rules on the use of coatings and adhesives but the latest standard upgraded restrictions and widened the jurisdiction to cover

Tianjin and Hebei where rules had been more relaxed.

The standard is the first jointly-issued rule for the three areas to fight air pollution.

By 2017 the region must cut PM2.5 density by 25 percent from 2012 levels, according to a government action plan issued in September 2013.

Beijing has been struggling to reach its target of an average PM2.5 density of 60 micrograms per cubic meter. In the first three months, its PM2.5 density averaged 84 micrograms per cubic meter.

However, Beijing's air quality is already ranked the best among 28 cities in the three areas.

[Colleges, hospitals to be moved to Xiongan New Area](#)



Aerial photo of Xiongan New Area [Photo/Xinhua]

Some hospitals and universities will relocate from downtown Beijing to suburbs and nearby Xiongan New Area in Hebei Province to relieve the city of functions nonessential to its role as China's capital, 21st Century Business Herald reports.

Construction on some projects is likely to begin within the year, it said.

Beijing's development and reform commission recently unveiled key construction initiatives for 2017, including nine that involve new, expanded

or relocated projects for colleges and hospitals including Renmin University, Beijing Film Academy, Beijing Friendship Hospital and Peking University People's Hospital.

Earlier reports said some of the city's administrative agencies, companies, financial institutes, colleges and research institutes would be moved to Xiongan.

Chen Yao, a research fellow at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said colleges, hospitals and related operations, institutions and agencies could all shift to this area in future.

Yin Zhigang, a Beijing-based researcher, said it is necessary for Xiongan to host non-capital functions that are shifted away from Beijing. "It's not necessary for citizens across the country to come to the capital to see a doctor anyway," he noted.

Colleges closely related to the development of local industries will be the priority, it was added. In Yin's opinion, those set up in Xiongan should integrate with local science and technology industries and companies, and share resources with others.

The New Area about 100 km southwest of downtown Beijing will span three counties that sit at the center of the triangle formed by Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei's provincial capital Shijiazhuang.