

Shanghai implements stricter smoking ban

A stricter smoking ban took effect on Wednesday in Shanghai, banning smoking in indoor public places, workplaces and public transport.

The new regulation bans smoking in indoor areas of hotels, restaurants, entertainment venues, as well as airports, and train and port stations.

It also prohibits smoking outdoors at certain public venues visited by children, including schools, after-school educational institutions and children's hospitals. Outdoor auditoriums in stadiums are also subject to the ban.

The ban was passed by the municipal legislature in November. It is an amendment to the city's tobacco control rule implemented in 2010.

A recent survey showed 23.3 percent of adults in Shanghai were smokers, about 4.89 million people.

Individual violators of the new ban can be fined 50 to 200 yuan (7.2 to 29 U.S.dollars), and venue operators violating the ban face fines up to 30,000 yuan.

Shanghai has distributed 1.5 million smoking ban signs and 3.2 million smoking control posters.

"Smoking control needs legislation. But what is more important is implementation," said Chi Liming, a Shanghai resident.

However, people often ignore the ban.

"Sometimes even if we ask our guests to stop smoking, they may find another place and smoke stealthily," said Guo Yifeng, deputy general manager of the Shanghai International Convention Center.

China has 316 million smokers, with a further 740 million exposed to second-hand smoke.

Nearly 20 Chinese cities have passed their own tobacco control rules. Beijing, the national capital and home to more than 4 million adult smokers, implemented the strictest smoking ban in the city's history on June 1, 2015, prohibiting smoking in indoor public places, workplaces and public transport.

"A national regulation banning smoking in public places is undergoing legislative process," said Mao Qun'an, an official with the National Health and Family Planning Commission, in November.

3 candidates qualified to run for HK's 5th chief executive

The nomination period for Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR)'s fifth term chief executive election ended on Wednesday, with altogether three candidates qualified to run for the vote to be held late March.

During the nomination period starting from Feb. 14, the Returning Officer at the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) has received nomination forms from Tsang Chun-wah, former Financial Secretary of the SAR government, Woo Kwok-hing, a retired justice, and Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor, former Chief Secretary of the SAR government. Their nomination forms are ruled valid by the Returning Officer, making the number of candidates in the election three.

Ip Lau Suk-yee, a lawmaker, declared that she will end her campaign to run in the chief executive election as she was not able to get enough nominations from the Election Committee.

According to Hong Kong Basic Law and other related laws, a Chinese citizen of no less than 40 years of age who is a permanent resident of Hong Kong SAR with no right of abode in any foreign country and has ordinarily resided in Hong Kong for a continuous period of no less than 20 years, is eligible to be nominated as a candidate.

A candidate must submit the nomination form subscribed by no less than 150 members of the Election Committee and each member can nominate only one candidate.

The election will be held on March 26, when the Election Committee composed of nearly 1,200 members elects by secret ballot the Hong Kong SAR's fifth chief executive to be appointed by the central government.

Investigation reveals fake 'torture stories' about lawyer Xie Yang

Amid all the hype created by four articles published by overseas media about the "torture" of detained Chinese lawyer Xie Yang, investigations by reporters and an investigative team have showed that the accusations were nothing but cleverly orchestrated lies.

Xie Yang, a lawyer in central China's Hunan Province, was put under

investigation by police in July 2015 for suspected inciting subversion of state power and disrupting court order, and placed under “residential surveillance in a designated location.”

The four stories carried by overseas media between Oct. 11 and Nov. 15, 2016 were entirely fabricated by disbarred Beijing lawyer Jiang Tianyong, 46, who was aiming to cater to the tastes of western institutions and media organizations and to use public opinion to pressure police and smear the Chinese government. The stories were essentially fake news.

Imagination-based “torture stories”

Jiang was detained on Nov. 21, 2016 after attempting to use somebody else’s identification card to take train. He was found to be carrying seven mobile phones, 11 SIM cards and seven bank cards.

Police investigations showed that he was also suspected of being in possession of documents that were related to state secrets, and inciting subversion of state power.

He is currently under “coercive measures,” which can include summons by force, bail, residential surveillance, detention and arrest.

Jiang confessed that after the Fengrui Law Firm in Beijing was put under police investigation in July 2016, he had been organizing people, including relatives of suspects involved in the case, to carry placards, create disturbances and secure interviews to mislead overseas reporters.

After Xie was detained, Jiang met with Xie’s wife, surnamed Chen, in September last year. He incited her to invent Xie’s torture stories and post them online.

According to the law, without police approval the defense lawyer could not meet with criminal suspects in custody during an investigation if they were involved in criminal cases including endangering national security, terrorism or serious bribery.

Both Jiang and Chen had not seen Xie during his detention.

However, to convince the public, Jiang gave Chen instructions, telling her:

- Fatigue interrogation must have been used by the police and it was a kind of torture;
- Xie was not a smoker, but the investigators were usually shown on TV as heavy smokers that stay up all night during interrogation, and that they could make up the story of Xie being fumigated with smoke, and this was also a kind of torture;
- Xie had not recovered from a fracture in his right leg before his arrest, and that they could pretend that the investigators tortured him by hurting his injured leg;

– They could pretend Xie was beaten up during interrogation.

Such coaching shows that Jiang was all too aware how people and the media could easily be manipulated for his own criminal ends.

“People could be easily convinced if we mingled the true with the false,” Jiang said. “I later rewrote and polished Chen’s torture story, split it into parts and published them in instalments to arouse sustained attention on Xie’s case.”

Jiang said he also sent the fake stories to “activists” overseas.

XIE IN GOOD CONDITION

When the Hunan Provincial People’s Procuratorate learnt about the media reports about Xie, it set up an independent team to investigate.

The team’s report, resulting from an investigation of Xie’s fellow inmates, interrogators, related personnel when he was under residential surveillance, and Xie himself, showed that the, so-called, torture did not happen.

A criminal suspect surnamed Wu, who shared a cell with Xie for three months, said Xie claimed that he was very comfortable when he was held under residential surveillance.

“Xie told me that he had several dishes for each meal and the police dared not to mistreat him,” Wu said.

Xie’s interaction with reporters tells a different tale to the “torture” story: he walked steady, took firm steps and acted naturally during his interview with the reporters; he told reporters that he slept nine hours every day, could get access to essential physical examinations, and was in a good physical condition; he said he enjoyed decent food and clothing and also received clothes and cotton quilts from his family last winter.

He could maintain communication with his family members even when he was under residential surveillance.

A letter sent by Xie’s wife to the police on Jan. 5, 2016, also shows that Xie was treated well.

“You have bought medicine for Xie Yang’s leg, passed our letters to each other, which conveyed my, and our child’s, yearning for Xie and Xie’s yearning for us. This has made us not that lonely in the past half year,” she wrote. “I appreciate your people-oriented management of Xie. Although it’s not convenient for you to tell me about his case, we know that Xie is safe and comfortable there through his letter.”

When the judicial organ told Chen she could meet Xie during his custody, Chen was very happy and sent a note to Xie through the police, saying that she would meet him at 3 p.m. the same day. However, she changed her mind half an hour later.

Jiang said that he persuaded Chen not to meet Xie, because he was afraid this might upset his plan. As a result, Xie has not been able to meet Chen so far.

Confessing his guilt and showing remorse, Jiang said he had created trouble for the police, attacked the Chinese government and smeared the image of the judicial organs.

He also expressed his hope that those who did similar illegal acts would learn a lesson from him and start afresh.

"It's not too late," he said.

China in countdown to annual political high season

Members of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) National Committee have started to gather in Beijing for the top political advisory body's annual session, which is scheduled to open Friday.

Political advisors from central China's Henan Province were the first to arrive on Wednesday.

On Sunday, the National People's Congress (NPC), the top legislature, will also convene its annual session. Dubbed the "two sessions," the dual gathering is significant in China's political calendar as it sets the national agenda for the year and beyond.

This year the meetings carry extra weight as they are the fifth and last sessions of the 12th NPC and the 12th CPPCC National Committee.

At the parliamentary assembly, legislators are expected to deliberate a draft decision on deputy elections for the 13th NPC, and draft methods for the election of deputies to the 13th NPC from Hong Kong and Macao special administrative regions.

The two sessions are also the first high-profile national political events held since President Xi Jinping was endorsed as the core of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee at a key CPC meeting last October.

Pledges to conform to the CPC Central Committee with Xi as the core are expected to feature significantly.

"The CPC needs a strong core of leadership. Otherwise, it will have no cohesiveness or competence to lead all manners of undertakings. The endorsement of Xi as the core has come naturally, with the backing of the entire Party and the people," said Xin Ming, a professor with the Party School of the CPC Central Committee.

Much of the focus during the March sessions will center on the economic front, as in previous years, with a government work report to be delivered by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to confirm the country's growth targets for the year.

China registered 6.7 percent GDP growth in 2016, a nearly three-decade low, amid concerns over weak growth momentum in major economies, rising trade protectionism, domestic debt overhang, excess capacity and a highly leveraged property market.

However the growth rate was within the Chinese government's target range and outpaced most other major economies, scotching rumors of a hard landing.

Although no official target for this year will be available until the opening of the parliamentary session, China has targeted average annual growth of more than 6.5 percent during the 13th-five-year plan (2016-2020).

Explaining the plan to a key Party conference in late 2015, President Xi Jinping said maintaining an average annual growth of at least 6.5 percent was necessary to reach the target of doubling GDP and per capita income from 2010 levels by 2020.

The target is crucial for China to attain its two centenary goals: becoming a moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2021, the 100th anniversary of the CPC, and a modern socialist country that is "prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" by 2049, the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China.

"I see 2017 as showing considerable continuity with 2016. Growth will continue to be fueled primarily by the increasing importance of consumption as opposed to investment, and services as opposed to industry," said Nicholas R. Lardy, senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

With the CPC set to hold its 19th National Congress in Beijing in the second half of the year, stabilizing the economy will be prioritized by policymakers.

A Central Economic Work Conference late last year made "seeking progress while maintaining stability" the main theme for economic work in 2017, pledging progress in supply-side structural reform.

Xu Guangjian, vice dean of Renmin University's School of Public Administration, is confident in China's ability to maintain medium-high growth of 6.5 to 7 percent.

"The domestic market is yet to be further tapped, the infrastructure sector has huge potential for investment and resident consumption keeps growing steadily," he said.

Zheng Xinye, assistant dean of Renmin University's School of Economics, suggested increasing effective supply in medical, education and housing sectors in order to meet people's needs, give people a greater sense of gain

and ensure steady economic growth.

For those eyeing the effects of China's economic projects on the rest of the world, the Belt and Road Initiative will be a focus.

The initiative, which has yielded infrastructure projects, economic and trade cooperation zones, and jobs, is telling evidence of China's resolution to champion free trade and open markets amid increasing anti-globalization sentiment and rising trade protectionism.

"The Initiative signals China's active participation in global economic and financial governance. Rather than a passive player in the building and maintenance of the international economic order, China has taken on responsibilities that match its economic status and national strength," Xu said.

Lawmakers and political advisors will also take the occasion to review and discuss a draft General Provisions of Civil Law, which states the basic principles of the country's long-awaited civil code.

The drafting of the general provisions started in March 2015. Since June last year, the draft has gone through three readings at the top legislature. During the process, many opinions and revisions have been taken on board to address people's concerns, adapt to the country's needs and embody socialist values.

It is rare for a draft law or an amendment to go through three readings and not be passed. One outstanding case was the property law, which was passed in March 2007 after eight readings.

The draft states that personal liberties and human dignity are protected by the law, and is expected to be approved at the upcoming parliamentary session, a crucial first step in introducing a civil code, hopefully in 2020.

Since a decision to compile a civil code was made in October 2014, it has been treated as a necessary move to perfect the country's socialist legal system with Chinese characteristics, and significant in modernizing state governance.

Compiling a civil code takes two steps: formulating the general provisions, and integrating separate civil laws into a unified code.

"The making of the general provisions and the civil code will elevate the protection of civil rights to a new height," said Professor Yin Tian with the Law School of Peking University.

"This will contribute significantly to promoting the sound development of the economy, improving state governance, and preventing state power from encroaching upon the legitimate rights of civil subjects," Yin said.

Other topics at the NPC session include a state budgetary review, military spending and law enforcement.

China announced a 7.6 percent rise in its national defense budget last year, the lowest growth in six years, breaking off a five-year run of double-digit increases between 2011 and 2015.

The increase in 2015 was 10.1 percent.

China releases first strategy on cyberspace cooperation

China on Wednesday released its strategy on cyberspace cooperation.

The International Strategy of Cooperation on Cyberspace is the first China has released regarding the virtual domain.

The aim of the strategy – jointly building a community of shared future in cyberspace – illustrates China's approach to cyberspace cooperation. Notably one that is based on peace, sovereignty, shared governance and shared benefits.

The strategic goals of China's participation in international cyberspace cooperation are: the safeguarding of China's sovereignty, security and development interests in cyberspace; the secure and orderly flow of information on the Internet; improved global connectivity; maintaining of peace, security and stability in cyberspace; enhancement of international rule of law in cyberspace; the promotion of the global development of the digital economy; and deepening cultural exchange and mutual learning, according to the strategy.

China's plan of action includes promoting the building of rule-based order in cyberspace, expanding partnership with other countries, boosting institutional reform in Internet governance, jointly combating cyber terrorism and crimes, and protecting individual privacy in cyberspace.

China supports Internet-based innovation and entrepreneurship, and is committed to assisting developing countries with cyber security capacity building, it said.

The country supports the formulation of cyberspace trade rules and effective policy coordination among countries, said the strategy.

China will work with other countries to strengthen global information infrastructure to facilitate the smooth flow of information, and facilitate cyber culture cooperation among countries, according to the strategy.

With the animation, comic and games industry as a priority area, China will carry out practical cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road,

encourage Chinese enterprises to provide online cultural products and services catered to local needs based on local cultural resources, said the strategy.

The strategy was issued by the Foreign Ministry and State Internet Information Office.