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Fire kills 39 people in China's Spring Festival holiday

A total of 13,796 fires occurred during China's week-long Spring Festival holiday that ends Thursday, killing 39 people and forcing the evacuation of 10,523 others, the Ministry of Public Security said.

The fires resulted in direct economic losses of 44.63 million yuan (about 6.49 million U.S. dollars), marking a 54.1 percent drop compared with the same period last year, the ministry said in a statement.

The number of fires and fire casualties decreased by 11.8 percent and 26.4 percent respectively year on year, it said.

No fire claimed more than five lives during the holiday, it noted.

Fires are usually caused by setting off fireworks and firecrackers during the holiday as the Chinese believed the noise will drive away bad spirits and bring good luck.

However, sales of fireworks have dropped in recent years in cities amid pollution concerns and government restrictions. Nationwide, 444 cities have banned fireworks and 764 other cities imposed restrictions on setting off fireworks, according to the ministry.

Amitabh Kant launches India Innovation Index A joint initiative of NITI Aayog, DIPP and CII

To make India an innovation-driven economy, NITI Aayog, Department of Industrial Policy & Promotion (DIPP) and Confederation of Indian Industry

(CII) together launched a mega initiative “India Innovation Index”

Update from the Environment Agency

I have received the following update from the Environment Agency:

Maintenance programme

- In 2015/16 we carried out river maintenance at 15 locations in your constituency. This work took place along 14.5km of rivers including the Loddon, Swallowfield Ditch, Emm Brook and the Kennet. It included removing obstructions, tree and shrub maintenance and carrying out selective weed and vegetation clearance. In 2016 / 17 we are carrying out a similar maintenance programme. The attached map shows the main locations and types of work we're doing.

Emm Brook and South Wokingham Distributor Road

- We have been engaging with Wokingham Borough Council (WBC) over the design of the South Wokingham Distributor Road (SWDR) since the early planning stages, and we will continue to work with WBC as the plans progress. The aim is that the SWDR reduces downstream flood risk from the Emm Brook, notably in locations which have historically been affected by river flooding. The developer anticipates completing the design for the relief road and residential development this calendar year with a view to start construction of the different elements of the scheme in 2018 and 2019.

Planning consultations and permitting

- Since April 2016 we have commented on 78 planning applications within Wokingham. In line with our remit our responses ensured that the layout of development sites, where there is a risk of flooding from rivers, is appropriate; for example, siting dwellings where there is a low risk. Redevelopment does occur within floodplains and in these situations we provide advice so that floor levels are set above flood levels. In the vast majority of cases the local planning authority will take our advice on any flood risk objections. However if planning permission, for a major application, is given against our advice and the effects of flood risk are significant, we would use a call in process (through the Secretary of State) to reconsider whether planning permission should be granted. We did not call in any applications in 2016 in Wokingham.

Swallowfield Temporary Defence Deployment Plan

- In 2016 the Government funded 32km of additional temporary barriers nationally (bringing our total national stock to 40km) to protect local

communities during flooding. We have a draft deployment plan for Swallowfield where our assessments show there is potential to protect the community. We are consulting with partners and the community to finalise the arrangements

Appraisals for future flood risk improvements

- Our future programme for permanent flood defences includes Swallowfield and Lower Earley. We will appraise whether options such as flood walls and embankments are viable in these locations. River modelling is needed to make these assessments and we will test these options once the modelling is available. We will have the outcomes from the appraisal in autumn 2018.

Local Partnership Meetings

- The Berkshire Flood Partnership is made up of all Berkshire Lead Local Flood Authorities, Thames Water and ourselves. The next meeting is on 7 March 2017. The meeting is chaired by Cllr Jesse Grey of Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

We also meet with the Loddon Valley Residents Association and Loddon Basin Flood Action Group



This White Paper is a wish list, not an action plan – Keir Starmer

Keir

Starmer MP, Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, speaking after the release of the Government's Brexit White Paper, said:

"Today's White Paper is indicative of the Government's whole approach to Brexit.

"For months they have refused to publish a plan or allow proper scrutiny, and when they are finally forced to produce a White Paper it is rushed, limited and not well thought through.

"The White Paper offers no certainty for EU citizens living in the UK, no additional detail on how workers' and consumer rights will be protected, and nothing on

how full tariff-free access to the single market will be delivered.

"It's
a wish list, not an action plan.

"Labour
has said throughout that there needs to be accountability and scrutiny
throughout the Brexit process.

"Next
week we will debate amendments to the Article 50 Bill that would achieve that
—
in particular by guaranteeing a meaningful vote that ensures our Parliament
votes on the Article 50 deal before the European Parliament does. The
Government should welcome that, not reject it".