

### INVESTING IN WATER

More than \$US5.56 billion will be spent by the Government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on environmental issues, with emphasis on cleaning up the Wei He River, which runs through the provinces of He Bei, He Nan and Shan Xi.

The Wei He River is part of the Yellow River, the second-largest river of the PRC.

The Shaanxi Provincial Environmental Protection Bureau is spearheading the 5-year programme for the period, 2006-2110.

One may state, at this point: *'Ah, well, better late than never!'*

The PRC Government recognises that every year about 80,000 tons of sewage are pumped into the Wei He River and this sewage is the biggest source of pollution of the Yellow River.

The Wei He River is 800 kilometres long and is home to about 64 percent of the human population of Shaan Xi, irrigating about 72 percent of the province's farmland.

It is, now, accepted, officially, that about 70 percent of all of the PRC's rivers are polluted, to one degree or another, with one or more contaminants.

Last week, after more than 9 days of dickering, with one petty PRC Government official after another, trying to cover up the catastrophic situation at Harbin, it was announced that a crisis was at hand: A 50-mile slick, containing mainly benzene, had reached Harbin in the northern part of the PRC.

The potentially deadly toxic slick was the result of an explosion at a petrochemical plant at Jilin City.

Water mains were turned off and residents of Harbin were instructed to keep away from the polluted water.

The contaminant is benzene, a colourless, highly flammable liquid, which is distilled from petroleum and is, normally, used as a cleaning agent, as a solvent, and may be found in dyes and paints.

At high levels, benzene is lethal to humans.

The Government of the PRC was well aware of the fact that the catastrophe at Jilin City on November 13 was just waiting to happen and that similar catastrophes are just waiting to happen, also.

It has been confirmed that the explosion at Jilin City on November 13 was the catalyst that helped to discharge 100 tonnes of toxic chemicals into the Song Hua River, which runs into the Wei He River, which, in turn, joins the Yellow River.

For a period of at least 9 days, residents of Jilin and surrounding areas were not told of the extent of the accident and of the pollution of the river, which was a direct result of the explosion at the petrochemical plant.

Initially, in fact, it was declared that the Jilin City explosion had not caused any contamination of the Song Hua River or any other river.

At the highest levels of Government, it is well known that the country has to consider ways and means to clean up its waterways, or pay the cost.

The very reclusive attitude of most of the officials of the PRC Government's Environmental Protection Administration, out of fear of being discovered and/or falling out of favour in Beijing, more than anything else, is one of the prime reasons for the inhabitants of Harbin, and most other major cities of the PRC, to have grave cause for concern.

Water is life; without it, people die.

The water crisis of Harbin came about due to poor governance, the industrial accident at Jilin City, and the reclusiveness of the PRC Government Environmental Protection Administration, which withholds vital facts from its own people.

### **The Future**

It is, presently, estimated that water consumption, internationally, by the year 2025 will be such that there will be a very definitive scarcity unless tens of billions of US dollars are spent in water infrastructure.

In 1995, about 3 percent of the world's population was suffering from a shortage of potable water.

By 2050, at the present rate of water consumption, it is forecast that 18 percent of the world's population will be suffering from a scarcity of potable water.

While, today, there is an ample amount of water to satisfy most demands, internationally, it is, also, recognised that about 1.10 billion people, around the world, have little to no access to fresh water.

At the same time, agencies of the **World Health Organisation (WHO)** have determined that about 2.40 billion people in the world have no access to improved sanitation.

Most of these people are in Asia and Africa, with the majority of them, living in rural areas, such as on the outskirts of Harbin, Jilin, etc.

By the year 2025, it is estimated that there will be about 8 billion people, living on the earth.

With increases in the human population will come increased demands for water, for consumption and for irrigation purposes.

At the present rate, water consumption is doubling every 29 years, according to WHO, because more and more people are moving away from rural areas into urban areas.

Increased urbanisation is putting a strain on water infrastructure, especially on water drainage and water treatment.

In Africa, today, only some 24 percent of the human population has access to piped water through household connections.

In Asia, that figure is even higher – because piped water does not even reach 50 percent of the human population.

And, as for sewage, the situation is even worse in Asia, according to WHO.

It is estimated that only about 18 percent of Asia's population has access to a sewage connection.

In the PRC, tens of billions of US dollars will have to be spent on water and water-treatment if the country intends to meet the demands of future generations.

In the north of the country, 66 percent of the country's crops are grown, but the land only has access to about 20 percent of the country's water.

Even the US Government recognises the need to invest in water, with a budget to improve this resource expected to be in excess of \$US277 billion, during the next 2 decades, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Since there is no substitute for water and since a shortage appears to be imminent unless action is taken, smartly, it stands to reason that the cost of water will rise in the years to come.

When fresh water for drinking and washing is coming out of the tap, one never stops to think of the cost of this luxury, which, in fact, is a dire necessity upon life, itself, depends.

There is good reason that the world's consumption of bottled water, today, is worth about \$US20 billion, annually, and has been rising at the rate of about 9 percent per annum over the past 5 years.

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