

Public anger in China as smog crisis continues

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Large swathes of southern China are covered by a thick layer of air pollution, posing serious risks to respiratory health and prompting authorities to caution residents in affected areas to remain indoors. The warnings follow one of the most severe “smog” crises to hit northern China, including the country’s capital, Beijing.

While heavy waves of air pollution over the winter months are an annual phenomenon, scientists and government authorities have stated that this year the environmental crisis has been lengthier and more intense because of adverse weather.

A La Niña weather pattern has contributed to a winter with higher levels of rain and snowfall, and lower temperatures, preventing the pollution from dispersing.

The clouds of smog often contain high levels of the pollutant PM2.5—fine particulates of less than 2.5 micrograms that can enter lungs and are carcinogenic. The particles are thought to contribute to a host of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.

On Sunday, authorities in Hong Kong reported PM2.5 levels of 190 micrograms per cubic metre, well above the recommended exposure limit of less than 25 micrograms. Readings above 150 micrograms pose serious health risks, according to the World Health Organisation. A spokesman for the government’s environmental protection department said light winds had trapped the pollutants above the city.

Provinces in southern China, including Hainan and Guangdong, have also been hit with high levels of pollution, causing low visibility on roads and at airports in major cities and affecting schools and businesses. In the north, authorities in Beijing have told residents to remain indoors, as smog-tainted snow continues to fall.

The current air pollution began last November. In mid-December, 23 cities in the country’s north, including Beijing, issued red alerts for smog levels. This is the highest warning, which triggers emergency

measures, including factory and school closures and limits on the number of cars permitted on the roads. Last week the government declared an unprecedented national red alert. Up to 460 million people have been affected in northeastern China.

There are growing signs that the protracted crisis is becoming a focal point of widespread anger over health and safety issues, prompting a nervous response from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime.

An article in the state-owned *Global Times* on January 5 was headlined: “Public opinion in China was choked with depression, fear and anger.” The article noted that previously air pollution had been the “butt of jokes,” but “the sentiment changed noticeably during this round of smog.” It warned: “The heavy smog has also been corroding the government’s credibility.”

In a follow-up article on Monday, the *Global Times* drew attention to complaints and protests from sections of the middle-class in China’s major urban centres who constitute a key constituency of the government. The article highlighted the comments of Jin Zin, a Beijing investment consultant, who said: “My 70-year-old mother got sick after coming to Beijing from Qingdao, Shandong Province. My twins cough even though they are just 9 months old. My heart feels sore every time I hear them cough.”

Last week, Jin issued a public complaint directed to the China’s state council demanding to know why the air pollution had not been curbed. “I believe what’s frightening is not the smog, but your indifference,” it stated. The post was viewed over a million times on the Weibo social media site before being removed.

The article also noted a lawsuit brought by five lawyers from the industrial centres of Beijing, Tianjin and Hebei Province, demanding that city government authorities be punished for the pollution, and that compensation be provided to those affected. The case has not progressed since being filed at the end of

December.

Significantly, the *Global Times* cited Ma Jun, head of a Beijing-based environmental organisation, who favourably referenced environmental protests in the United States during the 1960s. The CCP government is intensely fearful of public displays of social anger and opposition. In December, riot police in the southwestern city of Chengdu arrested an unknown number of protesters who placed face masks on public statues amid heavy smog.

Thousands of posts have appeared on social media, commenting on the crisis. Anger has particularly revolved around the plight of children. One widely-shared picture showed high school students wearing face masks and sitting an exam outside during heavy fog in December in Henan province.

There were reports of widespread frustration when the education department in Shijiazhuang announced last month, following a red alert, that school attendance for middle and high school students would be voluntary. The city had some of the highest pollution readings, with PM2.5 levels of up to 733 micrograms. One comment on social media, cited by SBS Australia, asked: “Are middle school students’ bodies air purifiers? Are you going to wait for us all to become sick before you step up to fix this?”

According to the official Xinhua news agency, Environment Minister Chen Jining told a press conference last week he “felt guilty” for the crisis and “wanted to reproach himself.”

The government appears to be preparing to scapegoat local and city governments, announcing an inquiry into alert responses in some of the worst-affected industrial centres. At the same time, officials in Beijing this week created a new environmental police force, tasked with cracking down on wood burning, garbage incinerators and other polluting activities. Air purification systems are also being piloted in some of the city’s schools.

Local government officials have issued vague promises that the worst-polluting factories will be closed, and that others will be upgraded, but have not provided any concrete details.

The various measures are of a cosmetic character. While the government has fraudulently sought to provide itself with “green credentials,” in order to exploit the lucrative market in trading carbon emissions, it has pressed ahead with the construction of

coal-fired power stations, which are thought to be among the main causes of the smog. Two hundred new plants are set to be built, to add to the hundreds already operating.

The air pollution crisis is a particularly graphic expression of the subordination of public health and social need to the unbridled pursuit of profit by the corporate and financial elite who are represented by the CCP government.

While national figures are hard to come by, it is widely recognised that air pollution has a significant impact on mortality rates. A Nanjing University School of the Environment study estimated that almost one-third of deaths across the country could be linked to air pollution. In 2014, the World Health Organisation said over a million deaths in China during 2012 could be attributed to air pollution exposure.



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