

Plans for Chemical Plants Raise Questions in Southwest China



A protest against a PX chemical plant in the city of Ningbo in Zhejiang province. The banner reads: "Project PX get out of Ningbo, Ningbo people stand up."

Welcome to As It Is, the daily magazine show from VOA Learning English.

I'm Mario Ritter.

Today, we look at plans by some large companies to improve conditions for factory workers in Bangladesh after the tragic building collapse there. We also hear about the retirement of a famous soccer star. But first we look at growing environmental awareness in China.

There have been protests in China against plans to build chemical production and oil processing centers. Protestors say they are concerned about the possible health and environmental effects of the factories. The protests could be a sign that environmental activism is increasing in China. VOA's Bill Ide in Beijing is following the story. Kelly Jean Kelly has his report.

Protests over oil refineries and chemical factories are becoming increasingly common in China. Protesters are especially concerned about production of a substance called paraxylene, or PX. It is used to make many products, from polyester clothing to plastic bottles. The substance is suspected of causing cancer.

Since 2007, at least three planned PX plants have been canceled in China following local protests. This month, protestors in the capitals of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces also protested against planned PX projects.

One person who took part in the protests tells VOA that citizens in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, are not boycotting the project entirely. She says they want to know more about the project and its effects. They also want to know why their areas were chosen. Yunnan depends heavily on its travel industry and the chemical factories could harm that income.

Chinese officials approved the oil refinery in Kunming in January. But news of the project was not released until March.

State-owned China National Petroleum Corporation is building the refinery. The company has told the public that the project is safe and that it will not involve PX. But earlier this month, one company official said there would be no PX at the plant, while another said there would be PX.

Energy experts say the refinery project in Kunming is important because it is the first of its kind in Yunnan province. It is also a stop on the Burma-China pipeline, which is set to be completed soon.

I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Companies React to Bangladesh Tragedy

More than 1,100 people died when a building housing a number of clothing factories collapsed in Bangladesh last month. The tragedy has brought attention to labor conditions in the South Asian nation. Recently, some retail businesses and big name companies announced an agreement to improve conditions in Bangladeshi clothing factories. Christopher Cruise has more on the story.

Human rights and labor activists have welcomed the agreement. T. Kumar is with the rights group Amnesty International. He praised the steps that some clothing retailers have taken. But he questioned whether the effort would continue or was only an immediate reaction to the tragedy.

Western clothing retailers have agreed to a safety plan that requires them to carry out inspections and pay the costs of safety improvements.

Recognized brand names such as Italy's Benetton and Sweden's H&M are part of the safety agreement.

Charles Kernaghan heads the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights. He says the agreement is a "turning point," for the clothing industry, whose workers are mainly women.

The tragedy in April is not the first time a large number of Bangladeshi clothing workers have died. Last November, more than 100 people were killed in a clothing factory fire in Dhaka. In 2005, another building collapse killed more than 70 people.

Charles Kernaghan says the government in Bangladesh has to enforce safety rules and improve work conditions. But he says the real power lies with the retailers that sell clothing. Those companies are supporting an industry that employs more than four million garment workers.

"The U.S. companies, North American companies, European companies are in Bangladesh specifically because it has the lowest wages in the world. Twelve cents an hour for helpers, 22 cents for junior sewers, 26 cents for senior sewers, 13- to 14-and-a-half hours a day, sometimes seven days a week. Basically the workers get just two days off a month."

The agreement deals with some of these concerns by setting new standards for worker rights. It calls for establishing an advisory group that will assist with discussions among governments, retailers and trade unions. It also sets up a fire and building safety training program.

Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, is not part of the agreement. The American-based company has developed its own plan. It includes inspections of all 279 factories used by its suppliers in Bangladesh. Another company, GAP, says it will not be part of the agreement unless changes are made to limit legal responsibility.

In Bangladesh, the government says it is working to improve safety. The government also announced plans to raise the lowest permitted wage and make it easier to form labor unions.

I'm Christopher Cruise.

Beckham Says Goodbye

One of the most famous soccer players in the world, David Beckham, has announced plans to retire from the sport. June Simms looks back at his career that included playing in the United States.



David Beckham and Zlatan Ibrahimovic celebrate. Paris Saint-Germain's was Beckham's last team.

At the age of 38, David Beckham is retiring from soccer. Americans may best remember him for playing six seasons with the Los Angeles Galaxy of Major League Soccer. He won two league championships with the team.

Simply known as Beckham, he played midfield and was considered highly skillful with the ball. He gained fame as a teenager, playing for Manchester United in England.

Playing professionally with league teams, Beckham has a record equaled by few other players. He also won championships with Manchester United and Spain's Real Madrid. And he holds the record for most international appearances, 115, for England's national team.

Thank you for listening today. Join us at the beginning of the hour Universal Time for the latest news.