China Seeks to Stem Environmental Protests

GILLIAN WONG, Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The Chinese government will require that future industrial projects include assessments of their risk to social stability, following several large protests around the country over pollution, a top official said Monday.

The government will also increase transparency and public involvement in decisions regarding large projects with potential environmental impact, Minister for Environmental Protection Zhou Shengxian told reporters on the sidelines of a Communist Party congress at which a new generation of leaders will be installed.

Zhou acknowledged the sensitivity of the issue but said it was natural for such incidents to occur as living standards rise. "I think it is inevitable that when a society is developed to a certain level, certain phenomena will naturally arise, this is regular. For China ... we are now in a sensitive period especially in terms of environmental issues," he said. "At the same time we are beginning to see a phenomenon called 'not in my backyard.'"

Pollution has become a major cause of unrest in China as members of the rising middle class become more outspoken against environmentally risky projects near them. The demonstrations are a reminder to the incoming generation of leaders that they face a public increasingly unwilling to accept environmental and health hazards as an inevitable consequence of breakneck, unbridled economic growth.

About a week before the party congress opened, thousands of residents in the eastern city of Ningbo gathered in front of the municipal government office and marched through the streets to protest against the proposed expansion of a petrochemical plant. It was the latest massive protest over fears of health risks from industrial projects — earlier ones in recent months targeted a waste-water pipeline in eastern China and a copper plant in west-central China.

Some of these protests have turned violent, with riot police using tear gas and batons to disperse crowds. Authorities in some cases have scrapped or shelved plans for the projects, but local officials who are under pressure to deliver economic growth often restart them once the outrage dies down.

Zhou said the recent protests were triggered by projects launched without approval, or without enough assessment of their impact.

"What we need to do is to earnestly learn these lessons," Zhou said, adding that his department in September began requiring more information on new projects be disclosed to the public.

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