

China

Title: Desertification and social unrest threatens China's Economic Development
Adaptation and Translation

Author: Alexander Freund, Deutsche Welle RADIO

Translation: Marie Kurth, marie.kurth@gmail.com

There has been much talk in recent times about the environmental problems being created by China's daunting economic development, key points of concern are air and water quality. But the man-made environmental problems are only a part of the challenges the Chinese are facing: the desert is also expanding across the country. The massive sand dunes, which are blown toward Beijing, have already begun to cause a water shortage. In an attempt to fight the encroaching desert, Chinese authorities are looking into reforestation projects in collaboration with German experts. Alexander Freund reports:

1. O-Ton Atmo Wind and Music

The warning is unmistakable: armed with machine guns and fighting a wind force of 10, police barricade the only road from Urumqi to Turfan. The sky has darkened, the trees are dangerously bent and nobody willingly leaves the house or car. Here in the deserts of northwest and northern China come the frequent and massive desert hurricanes, which have a wind force of 12 and sweep across the broad countryside, leaving behind a visible path of destruction. Power and water supplies give out, huts are destroyed, dozens of trucks lie overturned in the ditches.

For hundreds of years the people along the silk road have defied the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts. But the brilliance and splendor of former times has long since left and the economic boom in the coastal regions never came to the autonomous province of Xinjiang. No group has felt it more than the Moslem minority of the Uigurs. For that reason, there is a lot of unrest, to which Beijing responds with harsh brutality. Beijing fears the secession of the strategically important province of Xinjiang, and justifies its harsh action as part of the war against terror.

2. O-Ton Atmo Islam oder Allah

The present social tensions are not the only issues which could be dangerous for Beijing. Increasingly frequent sandstorms darken the sky above the capital. A thick, yellow smog settles on the cars, houses and streets. Commuters protect themselves with breathing masks; in the hospitals many, but especially the elderly, need to be examined and treated for breathing difficulties. But the sand isn't the only problem. Even in the capital there are frequent shortages of water, as Dr. Wolfgang Sculy from the German aid organization, GTZ, explains.

3. O-Ton Schulz

"You get to feel it yourself. Often after a night you have finger-thick dust and sand somewhere in your apartment. And the second difficult problem is the water shortage here in the city, because the water reservoirs around Beijing are now completely filled with sand."

Since 1978 the German company for international and technological cooperation, GTZ, has supported, among other things, the Chinese reforestation program, especially in the regions north and northwest of Beijing. Because farming is so intense, clear-cut logging and rapid industrialization have left behind very noticeable tracks. In the medium-term, the discontentment of people living in the country, the dramatic water-shortages and the spread of the desert could even jeopardize the Chinese economic boom.

4. O-Ton Schulz

"The Chinese themselves have a large program to protect the large cities, because imagine this for a minute - a city like Beijing with 14 million residents, with a booming economy, suddenly has no water. Or there are constant sand storms. Naturally the growth and development of the city would be drastically curbed."

In the last sand storm alone, around 300,000 tons of sand were blown into the metropolis. In preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games the city is visibly trying to stop the desert from encroaching further by creating a forest belt across the country. The most ambitious project is a vast "Green Wall," going through a total of 13 provinces, and stretching across almost 4,500 Kilometers.

5. O-Ton Schulz

"This is the largest reforestation project on the planet, affecting more than 40 percent of China's land space and at least 35 billion Hectares, so perhaps 350,000 square kilometers, which will be reforested in a time frame of just 80 years."

Around 13 million hectares have already recovered and are leafy—most with fast-growing poplar trees, which give the soil "footing" and need little water. In any case China must first learn from its mistakes, because in the course of establishing the massive reforestation campaign, Beijing permitted the creation of large mono-cultures, extremely susceptible to disease and pests, as Wolfgang Schulz from the GTZ explains:

6. O-Ton Schulz

"At the beginning of their efforts to push the desert back they already had problems, mostly of a technical nature. They relied heavily on these mono-cultures and when they had any sort of problem with pests entire areas were ruined. Now they're trying to mix the species, but of course they're still trying to work with these fast-growing plant species, namely poplars and pines."

Because there will be no yield from forestry for a long time, these protective forests are not the only ones planted in these regions. Cash trees, such as fruit or nut trees, will also be planted in order for the farmers to earn additional income and to better the chances of the reforestation program being accepted by those living in these rural areas.

7. O-Ton Schulz:

"A large section of "cash trees" will also be created, that means trees which yield money. First in line tend to be fruit trees, but in many cases there are also nut trees.

In a relatively short period of time the farmers see financial success and very often earn more than through their traditional field-grown fruits."

Beijing is investing quite a lot of energy and money in the reforestation program and is trying at the same time to make sure the campaigns do not ignore the concerns and needs of the rural population. Arne Goos, from the German Credit Institute for Reconstruction in Beijing sees this as a change of heart, and one that he emphatically supports:

8. O-Ton Goos

"Furthering the people's education and including them in certain measures is, I believe, a central point, because it's only together with the target group that we can accomplish anything and above all achieve a sustainable forest environment in China."

Nobody doubts the necessity of finding an effective way to combat desertification in Beijing. Every year China loses around 2,500 square kilometers to the desert. The living space of more than 100 million under threat. Accordingly, Beijing is set on strengthening the synthesis between economic growth and environmental protection. As Arne Good from the Credit Institute for Reconstruction explains:

9. O-Ton Goos

"When you look at the evidence and China's 11th Five-Year plan, it becomes quite clear that China wants to grow with the environment instead of without the environment, because it knows that otherwise it will come up against limits to economic, social and even natural resources. Now when one speaks of "sustainable development," economic goals alone don't count more than their environmental counterparts, and not at any price either."

The Chinese economic miracle has many winners, but also two major losers: the poor rural population and the environment. If Beijing manages not to let the economy grow at the expense of the environment, and if the rural population is allowed to share in the boom, then China can profit twice as much: It could come to grips not only with desertification but also with its social tensions.