

CLEAR SKIES FOR BEIJING OLYMPICS?

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Executive Summary

The Chinese government to date has spent about US\$ 35 billion to ensure the complete success of the 2008 Olympic Games, a showcase of China's economic miracles and rising international status, as well as an indicator of the communist regime's legitimacy.

Air pollution, however, is the hurdle for this image making, as Beijing is often blanketed by smog and dust, some from coal-fired industries and construction sites, and others from neighboring provinces or rocketing vehicle numbers. A U.N. report found that the average level of particulate matters in Beijing's air in 2006 was eight times higher than the level recommended by the World Health Organization.

After Jacques Rogge's, president of the International Olympic Committee, comment that some of Beijing Olympic events might have to be postponed if the athletes are at risk, Beijing is alerted to the fact that air pollution is not merely an image problem, but one that could affect the normal process of the Games.

Beijing has spent US\$ 15 billion battling environmental pollution, more than it promised when the city won the bid for hosting the Games in 2001.

It has mapped out temporary plans to clean up the air during the Games, including halving traffic through odd-even-number license plates, suspending construction projects and closing polluting factories in Beijing and neighboring provinces.

Based on Air Pollution Index, Beijing has claimed that the number of "blue sky" days has risen remarkably from 185 in 2001 to 246 in 2007, but a US environmental expert has cast doubt on these figures, saying that the Beijing authorities were using unrepresentative data from monitoring stations in less polluted areas and adopting less stringent standards.

Beijing has witnessed a vehicle boom over the past seven years, with emissions of 3.3 million automobiles contributing to about half of its air pollutants.

Neighboring provinces of Hebei, Shandong and Shanxi, and the Tianjin Municipality that are notorious for their coal-fired heavy industry also exert significant influence over Beijing's air quality; Hebei alone contributed 50-70% of Beijing's particulate matter concentration and 20-30% of ozone in the summer.

Even if Beijing generates no man-made emissions, by virtue of its geographic location, levels of particulate matters and ozone could still exceed healthful levels under unfavorable meteorological conditions.

To cope with environmental deterioration, China needs to revalue officials' performances on the basis of green indexes, and restructure its economy with an emphasis on the tertiary industry over the heavy and chemical industries.