

China Today updates : April 2010

15 Updates

Reporters Without Borders puts Russia's Putin, China's Hu on list of press 'predators'

By Associated Press

May 3, 2010 | 1:40 p.m.

PARIS (AP) — Media advocacy group Reporters Without Borders on Monday put Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao on its annual list of press freedom "predators."

The Paris-based group says its list is made up of "40 politicians, government officials, religious leaders, militias and criminal organizations that cannot stand the press, treat it as an enemy and directly attack journalists."

Newcomers to the annual list, released on World Press Freedom Day, include Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, Taliban overlord Mullah Omar and Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov.

Targeting China's Hu, the group said he has enlisted China's police and propaganda departments "to prevent any free press emerging." It also says he refuses to release activists, bloggers and journalists detained during the 2008 Beijing Games.

Receive breaking news alerts on your mobile device. [Register »](#)

Of Putin, Reporters Without Borders says: "Control is the key word for this former KGB officer: control of the state, control of the economic and political forces, control of geopolitical strategic interests and control of the media."

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told The Associated Press: "Their opinion is a mistake. The mistake can be put down to bias against Putin, or a lack of correct information."

Rwandan President Paul Kagame also appears: Reporters Without Borders says he "denigrates journalists" and that authorities "constantly harass" two Rwandan newspapers and prosecute their editors.

Others on the list include Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe.

Separately on Monday, three Algerian journalists were detained by police as they tried to organize a demonstration demanding the opening of the audiovisual sector to private radio and TV stations. One of them, Adlene Meddi, confirmed that they had been held and released.

The New York Times

May 2, 2010

Shanghai Is Trying to Untangle the Mangled English of Chinglish

By ANDREW JACOBS

SHANGHAI — For English speakers with subpar Chinese skills, daily life in China offers a confounding array of choices. At banks, there are machines for “cash withdrawing” and “cash recycling.” The menus of local restaurants might present such delectables as “fried enema,” “monolithic tree mushroom stem squid” and a mysterious thirst-quencher known as “The Jew’s Ear Juice.”

Those who have had a bit too much monolithic tree mushroom stem squid could find themselves requiring roomier attire: extra-large sizes sometimes come in “fatso” or “lard bucket” categories. These and other fashions can be had at the clothing chain known as Scat.

Go ahead and snicker, although by last Saturday’s opening of the Expo 2010 in Shanghai, drawing more than 70 million visitors over its six-month run, these and other uniquely Chinese maladaptations of the English language were supposed to have been largely excised.

Well, that at least is what the Shanghai Commission for the Management of Language Use has been trying to accomplish during the past two years.

Fortified by an army of 600 volunteers and a politburo of adroit English speakers, the commission has fixed more than 10,000 public signs (farewell “Teliot” and “urine district”), rewritten English-language historical placards and helped hundreds of restaurants recast offerings.

The campaign is partly modeled on Beijing’s herculean effort to clean up English signage for the 2008 Summer Olympics, which led to the replacement of 400,000 street signs, 1,300 restaurant menus and such exemplars of impropriety as the Dongda Anus Hospital — now known as the Dongda Proctology Hospital. Gone, too, is Racist Park, a cultural attraction that has since been rechristened Minorities Park.

“The purpose of signage is to be useful, not to be amusing,” said Zhao Huimin, the former Chinese ambassador to the United States who, as director general of the capital’s Foreign Affairs Office, has been leading the fight for linguistic standardization and sobriety.

But while the war on mangled English may be considered a signature achievement of government officials, aficionados of what is known as Chinglish are wringing their hands in despair.

Oliver Lutz Radtke, a former German radio reporter who may well be the world's foremost authority on Chinglish, said he believed that China should embrace the fanciful melding of English and Chinese as the hallmark of a dynamic, living language. As he sees it, Chinglish is an endangered species that deserves preservation.

"If you standardize all these signs, you not only take away the little giggle you get while strolling in the park but you lose a window into the Chinese mind," said Mr. Radtke, who is the author of a pair of picture books that feature giggle-worthy Chinglish signs in their natural habitat.

Lest anyone think it is all about laughs, Mr. Radtke is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Chinglish at the University of Heidelberg.

Still, the enemies of Chinglish say the laughter it elicits is humiliating. Wang Xiaoming, an English scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, painfully recalls the guffaws that erupted among her foreign-born colleagues as they flipped through a photographic collection of poorly written signs. "They didn't mean to insult me but I couldn't help but feel uncomfortable," said Ms. Wang, who has since become one of Beijing's leading Chinglish slayers.

Those who study the roots of Chinglish say many examples can be traced to laziness and a flawed but wildly popular translation software. Victor H. Mair, a professor of Chinese at the University of Pennsylvania, said the computerized dictionary, Jingshan Ciba, had led to sexually oriented vulgarities identifying dried produce in Chinese supermarkets and the regrettable "fried enema" menu selection that should have been rendered as "fried sausage."

Although improved translation software and a growing zeal for grammatically unassailable English has slowed the output of new Chinglishisms, Mr. Mair said he still received about five new examples a day from people who knew he was good at deciphering what went wrong. "If someone would pay me to do it, I'd spend my life studying these things," he said.

Among those getting paid to wrestle with Chinglish is Jeffrey Yao, an English translator and teacher at the Graduate Institute of Interpretation and Translation in Shanghai who is leading the sign exorcism. But even as he eradicates the most egregious examples by government fiat — businesses dare not ignore the commission's suggested fixes — he has mixed feelings, noting that although some Chinglish phrases sound awkward to Western ears, they can be refreshingly lyrical. "Some of it tends to be expressive, even elegant," he said, shuffling through an online catalog of signs that were submitted by the volunteers who prowled Shanghai with digital cameras. "They provide a window into how we Chinese think about language."

He offered the following example: While park signs in the West exhort people to "Keep Off the Grass," Chinese versions tend to anthropomorphize nature as a way to gently engage the stomping masses. Hence, such admonishments as "The Little Grass Is Sleeping. Please Don't Disturb It" or "Don't Hurt Me. I Am Afraid of Pain."

Mr. Yao read off the Chinese equivalents as if savoring a Shakespearean sonnet. "How lovely," he said with a sigh.

He pointed out that this linguistic mentality helped create such expressions as "long time no see," a word-for-word translation of a Chinese expression that became a mainstay of spoken English. But Mr.

Yao, who spent nearly two decades working as a translator in Canada, has his limits. He showed a sign from a park designed to provide visitors with the rules for entry, which include prohibitions on washing, “scavenging,” clothes drying and public defecation, all of it rendered in unintelligible — and in the case of the last item — rather salty English. The sign ended with this humdinger: “Because if the tourist does not obey the staff to manage or contrary holds, Does, all consequences are proud.”

Even though he had had the sign corrected recently, Mr. Yao could not help but shake his head in disgust at the memory. And he was irritated to find that a raft of troublesome sign verbiage had slipped past the commission as the expo approached, including a cafeteria sign that read, “The tableware reclaims a place.” (Translation: drop off dirty dishes here.)

“Some Chinglish expressions are nice, but we are not translating literature here,” he said. “I want to see people nodding that they understand the message on these signs. I don’t want to see them laughing.”

* Li Bibo contributed research.

Info

City and Poetry - eRenlai Newsletter May 2010

Greetings friends of eRenlai!

Can cities inspire poetry? What kind of poetic feelings does the city give rise to? How can the city be read as a giant poetic work? And can we foster the poetic soul of the cities we inhabit?

The May Focus of eRenlai crosses continental boundaries to give you anecdotes, films, poems and tarradiddles from the urban landscape across the world. As a special gift for springtime, we have no less than THREE short films, free with every copy of Renlai magazine purchased, complete with the directors' interviews. The interviews, with the talented Chris Churcher and the young visual artist Nat Niu can also be found online. The DVD focuses exclusively on Taipei, but if that wasn't enough Taipei for you, Benoit Girardot takes you on a poetic pictographic journey through Taipei in 4 acts, with scenes read by Paul and Nick. And Marie initiates us to Japanese poetry with a serene visit of Kyoto.

From Asia, we fly through the smoke-filled airs of Europe, where Benoit Vermander, a true urban nomad, takes us wandering through Europe; Lewis re-explores the unique Kavlav in the Czech Republic, whilst Ida, compares the alienation of angels and expats in Berlin and Tokyo. Paul revisits his hometown Canberra, where he finds strange similarities with a David Lynch film.

The Urban Nomad Film Festival has its own selection of poetic underground short films as well as the usual exciting selection of films with a particular focus on environmental films so we are proud to bring you an interview with the brains behind it all, Dave and Sean. Marie is also focused on environmental concerns, submitting the first of her two-part investigation into the environmental problems during wartime and Adam Materna gives a lesson in politeness to his Czech fellows.

Finally, don't forget to update your pictures and information on the new eRenlai network and if you are in Taipei, you can visit the Matteo Ricci exhibition at the National Library before it ends on the 16th of May. May 11th will see the 400th anniversary of the death of Matteo Ricci, with related events being held in various cities around that time. eRenlai will be present for the celebrations held in Shanghai: there will be a colloquium at Fudan University and the launch of the digital edition of the Ricci Dictionary in Shanghai Museum, where another Ricci exhibit is currently taking place. More on these events in our June issue...

Looking forward to a bright summer,

Cerise - eRenlai Magazine

www.erenlai.com

cerise@erenlai.com

Asia Time Online

Greater China

May 1, 2010

(This article first appeared in The Jamestown Foundation. Used with permission.)

(Copyright 2010 The Jamestown Foundation.)

Chinese leaders revive Marxist orthodoxy

By Willy Lam

Two unusual developments in elite Chinese politics have observers wondering if the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is moving toward political reform and changes in its policy toward ethnic minorities.

On April 15, Premier Wen Jiabao published an article in the People's Daily - the party's mouthpiece - that heaped accolades on the late party chief Hu Yaobang, who was sacked by patriarch Deng Xiaoping in 1987 for failing to deal harshly with free-thinking intellectuals. On top of that, the hardline "Emperor of Xinjiang", Wang Lequan, was replaced last weekend as party secretary of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (XAR) by the Hunan party boss, Zhang Chunxian, who is deemed a moderate.

While noteworthy, these portents of possible liberalization, however, have been counter-balanced by potent flare-ups of orthodoxy at the party-ideology level. Senior cadres and theoreticians have been called on to uphold the mantra of Chinese-style Marxism as the be-all and end-all of politics. Moreover, instead of relying on political reforms to defuse socio-political contradictions, the CCP leadership is devoting unprecedented resources to boosting its security and control apparatus.

Wen's eulogy of Hu has elicited attention in and out of China because the liberal party leader's death 21 years ago was the immediate cause of student protests that ended in the bloody Tiananmen Square

crackdown. In his article, Wen saluted Hu's "superior working style of being totally devoted to the suffering of the masses". The premier, who worked under Hu from 1985 to 1987, also praised his former boss's "lofty morality and openness [of character]".

The article has led to speculation that the CCP leadership might consider re-introducing reforms associated with Hu - and even reappraising the verdict on the June 4, 1989, massacre. The day the article appeared, some 20,000 Chinese posted comments on sina.com, a popular portal. Many hailed the article as a "positive development" in the direction of liberalization.

There is, however, no credible evidence that Wen's intent is to signal that the CCP is about to inaugurate a cycle of reform. Yang Jisheng, a former Xinhua News Agency editor and biographer of the late Zhao Ziyang - who was ousted after the Tiananmen incident - said the piece could "not be interpreted as a harbinger for the return of reforms".

Moreover, the decision to rehabilitate Hu's reputation had been made by President Hu Jintao and his Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC) colleagues in early 2005. On the late leader's 90th birthday in November of that year, the CCP held a commemorative meeting at the Great Hall of the People in which Hu posthumously received effusive praise for his contribution to the party and country.

Political observers in Beijing say it is probable that Wen's article is an effort by President Hu to bolster the status of the Communist Youth League (CYL) as the dominant - and perhaps most progressive - faction within the party. Indeed, Hu Yaobang was a founder of the league, and it was owing to his patronage that Hu Jintao became CYL first party secretary in 1984. It is understood that in the run-up to the 18th CCP Congress scheduled for 2012, President Hu has been pulling out all the stops to induct more CYL affiliates to the politburo and PBSC.

The removal of Wang, who has been the number one official in Xinjiang since 1995, has also been taken as a sign that the Hu-Wen leadership might want to turn a new page in Beijing's policy toward the Uyghurs. At its just-concluded Work Meeting on Xinjiang, the politburo vowed to "promote harmonious relations among masses of different nationalities and different religions, and to consolidate and develop harmony and stability in Xinjiang society".

Wang's replacement, former Hunan party secretary Zhang, is deemed a pragmatist who may eventually revise some of Wang's draconian policies against ethnic minorities. These include suppressing Uyghur identity and cracking down hard on Uyghur intellectuals who demand that XAR officials vouchsafe to Uyghurs the degree of autonomy in cultural and religious matters that are guaranteed by the Chinese constitution.

Yet there seems a higher likelihood that the Hu leadership will continue its time-honored iron-fisted approach toward taming the restive autonomous region. The main theme of the Xinjiang Work Meeting is to "uphold national unity and safeguard national security" and to safeguard the party's proverbial "long reign and perennial stability" in western China.

Top priority is being placed on buttressing military and security forces in the SAR. The public security budget for Xinjiang in 2010 was set at 2.89 billion yuan (US\$423 million), up 88% from last year.

Moreover, the policy of Sinicization - facilitating the migration of more Han Chinese businessmen, technicians and laborers to the XAR - has received a big boost. This past month, the party secretaries and other top officials from cities and provinces including Beijing, Guangdong, Liaoning, Jiangxi and Zhejiang visited Xinjiang under the banner of "assisting Xinjiang in economic [construction], providing Xinjiang with cadres and talents, and helping educate Xinjiang [residents]". A record number of state-run and private businesses from these eastern and central regions are set to move westward this year.

Far from resurrecting Hu Yaobang's famously tolerant and seemingly conciliatory policies toward intellectuals and ethnic minorities, the CCP leadership has further relied on its formidable control apparatus to snuff out challenges to its authority. It is significant that Wang's new posting is as deputy secretary of the CCP Central Commission on Political and Legal Affairs (CCPLA), the country's highest-level organ on law enforcement and wei-wen, or maintenance of political stability.

The powers and establishment of the CCPLA, which has direct control over the police, prosecutor's offices and the courts, have been augmented the past few years. Particularly since the July 5, 2009, riots in Xinjiang, which resulted in the death of 197 residents, the CCPLA has vastly strengthened its network of wei-wen units nationwide.

The National People's Congress last March approved outlays worth 514 billion yuan (\$75.26 billion) for public-security departments this year, which are almost as big as the People's Liberation Army budget of 532 billion yuan (\$77.89 billion). The regional Chinese media have disclosed that this year's wei-wen budget for provinces and cities including Liaoning, Guangdong, Beijing, Suzhou had jumped at least 15% over that of 2009.

At the same time, cadres responsible for ideology and the media are sparing no efforts to push forward President Hu's slogans about "Sinicizing and popularizing Marxism" as a means to ensuring socio-political stability and promoting national cohesiveness. At a recent forum on "Promoting Popular Contemporary Chinese Marxism", director of the CCP Propaganda Department Liu Yunshan urged cadres to "deeply grasp the laws of Marxist development, and to better arm the entire party - and educate the people - with the theoretical system of Chinese socialism". "We must take hold of the people through better [use of] the latest fruits of the Sinicization of Marxism," said Liu, a conservative commissar who is also member of the CCP politburo.

Ideologues and propagandists have, since the winter, been waging a campaign that is focused on "distinguishing four boundaries". In a nutshell, party commissars are demanding that China's intellectuals, particularly college teachers and students, make clear-cut distinctions between four sets of values.

They are Marxism versus anti-Marxism; a mixed economy that is led by Chinese-style public ownership on the one hand, and an economic order that is dominated by either private capital or total state ownership on the other; democracy under socialism with Chinese characteristics versus Western capitalist democracy; and socialist thoughts and culture on the one hand, and feudal and corrupt capitalist ideas and culture on the other.

According to ideologue Li Xiaochun, "Party members and cadres must buttress their political sensitivity and their ability in political discrimination. We must bolster [our] ideological defense line through self-consciously drawing a demarcation between Marxism and anti-Marxism," he said.

Moreover, in a paper on differentiating socialist and capitalist democracy, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Center on Socialist Systems pointed out that Western democracy was no more than "the game of the rich" and "democracy of the pocket book". The piece concluded that the quintessence of Chinese democracy must remain "democratic people's dictatorship" - and not Western-style democracy.

Meanwhile, politburo member and Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai, who raised eyebrows last year by spearheading a large-scale resuscitation of "red" or Maoist values in his west-China metropolis, has persevered with his campaign to revive policies and norms associated the Great Helmsman.

Apart from staging "revolutionary operas" and putting up Mao Zedong statues, Bo and company have sought to take better care of disadvantaged sectors in the municipality by building more "social-security apartments" and providing near-universal healthcare and pension. "Singing the praise of 'redness' means supporting what is right," Bo, a leading member of the so-called Gang of Princelings, said recently. "A city must do a good job of nurturing spiritual civilization." He added that cadres who are obsessed with gross domestic product GDP rates - but who lacked spiritual values - may "go down the road of corruption and degeneration".

With the 18th party congress little more than two years away, PBSC members and other senior cadres are preoccupied with sustaining socio-political stability - and paving the way for the elevation of faction affiliates into the new central committee and politburo. These conditions seem to militate against liberalization, which is seen as disruptive and destabilizing.

Seen in this perspective, Premier Wen's eulogy of Hu Yaobang and personnel changes in Xinjiang seem little more than efforts to placate the liberal wing of the party and the intelligentsia. For the foreseeable future, what party ideologues call the "leitmotif of the times" will likely remain, boosting the socialist orthodoxy in conjunction with beefing up the security apparatus.

* Dr Willy Wo-Lap Lam is a senior fellow at The Jamestown Foundation. He has worked in senior editorial positions in international media including Asiaweek newsmagazine, South China Morning Post, and the Asia-Pacific Headquarters of CNN. He is the author of five books on China, including the recently published Chinese Politics in the Hu Jintao Era: New Leaders, New Challenges. Lam is an Adjunct Professor of China studies at Akita International University, Japan, and at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

China wants telecom, Internet companies to inform on clients who leak state secrets

GILLIAN WONG

Associated Press Writer

6:11 AM PDT, April 27, 2010

BEIJING (AP) — China is poised to strengthen a law to require telecommunications and Internet companies to inform on customers who discuss state secrets, potentially forcing businesses to collaborate with the country's vast security apparatus that stifles political dissent.

The move, reported Tuesday by state media, comes as China continues tightening controls on communications services. It also follows a spat over censorship that prompted search giant Google Inc. last month to move its Chinese site to Hong Kong, which provides broader protection of civil liberties than mainland China.

A draft of amendments to the Law on Guarding State Secrets submitted to China's top legislature for review will make more explicit the requirement that telecoms operators and Internet service providers help police and state security departments in investigations about leaks of state secrets, the state-run China Daily newspaper said.

"Information transmissions should be immediately stopped if they are found to contain state secrets," the official Xinhua News Agency cited the amendment as saying. Xinhua said that according to the amendment, once a state secret leak has been discovered, records should be kept and the finding reported to authorities.

In China, state secrets have been so broadly defined that virtually anything — maps, GPS coordinates, even economic statistics — could fall under the category, and officials sometimes use the classification as a way to avoid disclosing information.

The new draft maintains that wide scope, defining state secrets as: "information that concerns state security and interests and, if leaked, would damage state security and interests in the areas of politics, economy and national defense, among others," Xinhua said. Reports did not say what penalties for violations would be under the amended law.

But its passage is unlikely to result in a significant change as communications companies are already often compelled by powerful authorities to comply with investigations.

The amended law is most likely to affect people using local Internet service providers, but it is unclear if Google, which still runs some services on its China site such as Google Video, will fall under the radar. Many other overseas websites, like Facebook and Twitter, are already blocked in China. It probably also won't interfere with companies that do not provide China-based services or store data in the country.

In 2006, Yahoo Inc. was heavily criticized by media and human rights activists and U.S. lawmakers after it emerged that the American Internet company had given Chinese prosecutors e-mails from the account of Chinese journalist Shi Tao. Shi was jailed in 2005 for allegedly providing state secrets to foreigners. His e-mails allegedly contained notes about a government memo on media restrictions.

The draft amendments were submitted Monday to the National People's Congress Standing Committee for a third review — usually the final stage before being adopted by lawmakers.

Chinese leaders appear determined to monitor the flow of information that reaches the world's largest Internet population, with some 384 million users. The government recently also issued new regulations to tighten procedures for domain name registration and to remove websites that are not officially registered.

Chinese authorities view the control of information as key to heading off or stemming the spread of unrest. After deadly ethnic riots broke out in a Muslim region in western China in July, Beijing unplugged the Internet entirely in the region and slowed cell phone service to stifle reports about the violence. Limited Internet and phone texting services were restored in recent months.

Human rights activists say the information control is used to stifle any challenge to the Communist Party's grip on power and to identify political activists and punish them.

Beijing-based human rights lawyer Mo Shaoping said the requirements in the amended law mean communications service providers will be unable to protect the privacy of their clients.

"Such regulation will leave users with no secrets at all, since the service providers have no means to resist the police," Mo said.

World hails opening of Shanghai Expo

English.news.cn 2010-05-01 23:23:28

BEIJING, May 1 (Xinhua) -- The 2010 Shanghai World Expo opened on Friday night, attracting the attention of the world and international participation and earning heartfelt congratulations.

Some 20 world leaders attended the opening ceremony and toured the Expo, including French President Nicolas Sarkozy and South Korean President Lee Myung Bak.

Chinese President Hu Jintao met Prime Minister of the Netherlands Jan Peter Balkenende in Shanghai Saturday.

Balkenende spoke highly of the opening ceremony and fireworks and said he was impressed deeply by the China National Pavilion and Sichuan Pavilion he visited Saturday morning.

While meeting European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso in Shanghai Saturday, President Hu thanked the EU for its participation in the Shanghai World Expo, the organization's first presence at a World Expo held outside the EU countries.

Barroso said the ceremony was a great event that showcased a modern China and a China that was much respected.

He also said the Expo would be conducive to a stronger common understanding between China and the EU.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued a statement Friday, saying he expected the Canada Pavilion would show Canada as a modern, democratic and pluralistic country.

"The Expo itself will provide us with an opportunity to build stronger economic, diplomatic and cultural ties with China as we showcase our country, our arts and culture, and our values," he said.

Expecting millions of visitors from around the world over the next six months, he said: "Let us seize this opportunity to promote our country and build closer ties with our trading partners."

Rafal Baniak, undersecretary of state in Poland's ministry of economy, said Saturday at a ceremony at the Shanghai Expo to open his country's pavilion that the Polish people wanted to give the world a better understanding of Poland's economic development through the Expo.

He added that Poland wished to foster closer economic ties with China.

Chairman and CEO of the U.S. Greater China Corporation, John W. Allen, told Xinhua in an email interview after the opening ceremony that "like the Beijing Olympics, the Shanghai Expo is bigger and better than any previous such event and will definitely set the standard for the future."

Allen echoed Chinese President Hu Jintao's remarks that the Expo was a "showcase of the best achievements of human civilization."

"It serves as a beacon for peace rather than a capacity for war," he said, "The Shanghai Expo will probably become an even hotter topic among Americans as China has once and again stunned the world by showcasing its might and skills of handling such big events."

In an interview with Xinhua, Milan's Mayor Letizia Moratti, whose city will host the next World Expo said: "Shanghai Expo will be a monumental exposition, with many magnificent buildings created by architects from all over the world."

"We have many things to learn from China's ability to quickly innovate, open to the world and adopt the best technologies," she said while extending her warm congratulations on the opening.

Editor: Mu Xuequan

Los Angeles Times - latimes.com

China debates whether human activity or nature is to blame for drought

An unusually long dry season, along with deforestation, pollution and dam-building, leaves farmers struggling. In some areas, people cannot even wash their hair regularly.

By Barbara Demick, Los Angeles Times

April 26, 2010

Reporting from Beijing

The images are heart-rending, farmers kneeling over the cracked earth that looks to be straight out of a post-apocalyptic movie, the dust swirling in the wind.

But what underlies China's worst drought in nearly a century is a matter of great debate. Is it Mother Nature or human failure?

Beyond the official explanation of "abnormal weather," Chinese environmentalists are pointing to deforestation, pollution, dams, overbuilding and other man-made factors. Scientists are searching for clues about why rain hasn't come in some parts of the country.

At its worst, the drought has left parched more than 16 million acres of farmland in more than four provinces, threatening the livelihood of more than 50 million farmers, according to government statistics. Up to 20 million people have been left without drinking water.

The Chinese army and paramilitary have been deployed in some hard-hit areas to deliver water, while residents of some mountainous villages inaccessible by motor vehicle have had to hike hours downhill and climb up again lugging plastic jugs of water in bamboo backpacks.

An unusually long dry season — which has stretched from September to the present — is at least part of the problem, but the underlying reasons are less clear. Some Chinese scientists believe that abnormally cold, wet weather in the north of the country is also linked to the drought in the southwest.

"The Earth is reacting to climate change," said Kuang Yaoqiu, a professor with the Guangzhou Institute of Geochemistry, who predicted the drought last year. "China's mainstream meteorologists haven't accepted these theories. It will take time."

In Chinese government circles, many people still subscribe to Mao Tse-tung's famous dictum that "man should conquer nature," but that's proving difficult to accomplish.

The drought-related losses are both economic and highly personal. For all the tea in China, this year's crop is expected to be a fraction of what it was in previous years because of drought conditions in Yunnan and Guangxi provinces, home to much of the tea production.

"There are huge cracks in the ground. The leaves on the trees are so dry they looked like they were set on fire," said Wu Liuzhi, manager of a tea processing plant in Guangxi's Lingyun county.

At home, it is just as miserable. "People can't brush their teeth every day. If there is a little water you want to wash your face." Wu wouldn't say when she last washed her hair — only that "we hold on until you can't stand it anymore."

In Yunnan province, the traditional water splashing festival practiced by the Dai ethnic minority to celebrate the mid-April New Year's holiday was this year reduced to a "water sprinkling" festival.

In response, the Chinese government has deployed the mighty arsenal of what is called the weather modification bureau, using rockets and planes to shoot more than 6,000 shells into the clouds in hopes of inducing rain.

Yu Bohan, 27, a tea farmer from Yunnan's Xishuangbanna region, said that her family's crop of 330 pounds is less than one-third of normal and that the government's rain-making efforts may be to blame.

"Some villagers suspect that the weather has become angry with us for shooting too many of those artificial rockets," Yu said.

Some scientists say the fault lies with the destruction of the natural forest and the replanting of cash crops that suck up too much water. Among the notorious water-guzzlers are rubber trees and eucalypts, which are used for paper and pulp production and are so vigorous that farmers sometimes claim to hear them growing at night.

"In the rainy season, the forest holds in the water and releases it slowly in the dry season. That is the natural ecological function of the forest," said Ma Jun, a well-known water expert whose writings about China's water crisis have been likened to Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring." "The drought is obviously caused by lack of rainfall, but the deforestation hurts our ability to adapt to unfavorable climate."

Yunnan, the hardest-hit province, is home to China's last swatch of rain forest and many of its glaciers, which gives it an unusually fragile ecosystem. The largest lake in the province, Dian Chi, which used to supply drinking water to the provincial capital, Kunming, is now so polluted that the water cannot even be used for agriculture.

There are also a large number of dams in the region that critics say have damaged the ecosystem of the province. The most controversial is the still-under-construction Xiaowan dam, which will be the second-largest hydroelectric power station in China after the Three Gorges Dam. Environmentalists say that the dam has reduced the water in the Mekong in Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam to its lowest level in 50 years, exacerbating drought conditions in those countries as well.

But Chinese government officials have denied responsibility for the water shortage.

"Statistics show that recent droughts in the Mekong River downstream [are] caused by severely dry weather," Vice Foreign Minister Song Tao said at a Mekong River Council meeting April 5 in Thailand. "The Mekong River's low water level is not related to hydropower plants."

* barbara.demick@latimes.com

* Tommy Yang of The Times' Beijing Bureau contributed to this report.

AsiaNews - www.asianews.it

04/23/2010 12:27

CHINA – UNITED STATES

US-China dialogue to restart with Internet and religious freedom

Human rights talks were suspended after the Beijing Olympics in 2008. They are scheduled to re-start on 13 May. Religious freedom and Internet censorship, one of Obama's administration key interests, will be on the table. The Americans are expected to appeal on behalf of lawyers who defend dissidents.

Washington (AsiaNews/Agencies) – The United States said yesterday that it would resume dialogue with China on human rights next month after a two-year hiatus, pledging to raise concerns about Internet and religious freedoms.

The talks, set for 13 and 14 May, would be the first under US President Barack Obama, who has faced harsh criticism at home from some activists who see him as downplaying human rights in his quest for stronger economic ties with mainland China.

The two nations had planned to hold talks at the start of year but everything was put off as China reacted angrily to US arms sales to Taiwan and President Barack Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama.

The two sides are expected to have a “candid discussion” on issues like religious freedom, Internet freedom and the rule of law, State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.

The United States is expected to talk about recent cases in which lawyers in China defending unpopular causes have arrested or harassed by the authorities, Crowley added.

“The rule of law means just that and the Chinese government should not be intimidating the legal profession or denying the right of counsel to any of its citizens,” he explained.

Beijing and Washington began holding talks on human rights in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre.

Beijing eventually suspended the annual event in 2002 in anger over US criticism at the United Nations of its rights record. It only agreed to one other round of talks, which were held in Beijing in May 2008, in all likelihood to improve its image ahead of that year's Olympics. In fact, after the Games were over, the talks were suspended again.

Michael Posner, the US assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labour, and Chen Xu, director general of China's foreign ministry's department of international organisations and conferences, will head their respective teams at the talks on 13 and 14 May.

Tibetans hold mass cremations for quake victims

By China correspondent Stephen McDonnell and wires

Updated 17 April 2010 - ABC News

Tibetans are holding mass cremations for 1,114 people killed after a powerful earthquake hit western China earlier this week.

Rescue workers alongside monks with bandaged and bloodied hands continue to dig through rubble in the hope of finding survivors.

But, after three freezing nights, few are being rescued now.

On the Tibetan Plateau, the priority now is holding funerals.

In Yushu, which bore the brunt of this week's powerful earthquake, monks are cremating bodies in their hundreds.

For Tibetans, funeral services must be held within three days.

Local tradition usually calls for sky burials, where bodies are left in the open for birds to eat, but with so many dead this is considered impractical and unhygienic.

Huge funeral pyres are used to cremate the victims and chanting Buddhist monks are lighting the fires.

The cremation ceremony began with a mix of tenderness and practicality.

The wrapped corpses lay in the back of dozens of trucks like bundles of used bedding, as monks and residents prayed.

"This prayer is wishing that they have a good reincarnation and that their suffering is over," said Gansong Getai, a local official who had volunteered to drive one of the funeral trucks.

When the convoy arrived on a grassy hill above town, monks placed the bodies on platforms above two trenches dug into the hillside, filled with burning wood and tyres for the cremation.

About 500 monks gathered on the hillside praying. The heat from the flames could be felt over a hundred metres away.

Times Online

April 16, 2010

China tries to sterilise 10,000 parents over one-child rule

Jane Macartney in Beijing

Family planning authorities have detained hundreds of people against their will in a campaign to sterilise 10,000 men and women suspected of trying to violate China's strict birth control policies.

About 1,300 people were being held in cramped and poor conditions in offices throughout the small town of Puning in southern Guangdong Province and are forced to listen to "lectures" on state rules limiting the size of families, the Nanfang Countryside Daily said.

In the years after China launched its strict "one couple, one child" family planning policy in the late 1970s, abuses such as forced later-term abortions, sterilisations and even the killing of newborn babies were widely reported.

But such practices have fallen sharply in recent years as the policy has become quite widely accepted and exceptions have been introduced.

However, officials in Puning launched a 20-day campaign on April 7 since so many couples have left the area in search of factory jobs and have found it easier to have children outside the government-set quotas.

The county intends to sterilise 9,559 women or their husbands who are suspected of planning to have a second or third child. So far about half that number have agreed to comply, the newspaper said.

Officials have detained the elderly parents of those who do not submit voluntarily to the surgery or who try to evade the authorities to force them to comply, the newspaper said. It reported that on April

10 some 100 people, mostly elderly, were seen inside a damp 200 square metre building at a township family planning centre.

The newspaper said: “There were some mats on the floor, but the room was too small for all people to lie down and sleep, so the young ones had to stand or squat. Due to the lack of quilts, many cuddled up to fight the cold.”

Among those being held was the 64-year-old father of Huang Ruifeng, who already has three daughters. Mr Huang said: “Several days ago, a village official called me and asked me or my wife to return for the surgery. Otherwise they would take away my father.”

Rules in Puning, as in most rural areas of China, allow farmers to have a second child if the first is a daughter. After that couples are supposed to stop.

An official at the Puning Population and Family Planning Bureau, who declined to be identified, told the Global Times: “It’s not uncommon for family planning authorities to adopt some tough tactics.”

Family planning officials are appraised on their success in enforcing birth control policies and sometimes employ such extreme methods if they fail to meet state-set targets. Authorities in Puning have already adopted a tough stance against couples who flout the rules.

They and their relatives who apply for permits to build a house are rejected. They are also being denied a local cash bonus. Illegal children are denied residency registration, a penalty that means they are excluded from a place in school.

One official told the newspaper that an investigation would be launched to establish whether authorities in Puning had exceeded their remit. A state-level regulation stipulates that couples who violate the family planning policy must not be punished without proper authorisation.

The New York Times

April 13, 2010

Editorial

Gao Zhisheng, Hu Jia, Liu Xiaobo

Washington and Beijing are, rightly, eager to lower tensions. After President Obama met President Hu Jintao of China at the White House on Monday, officials said they had agreed to work together to come up with new sanctions on Iran. That is good news.

Mr. Obama also must squarely acknowledge — and protest — the Chinese leadership’s continuing, ruthless stifling of any serious political dissent. That is bad news for China and the world.

The most recent reminder came when Gao Zhisheng, a crusading human rights lawyer, resurfaced last month. For more than a year, he had disappeared into the clutches of the government security network and many people had feared that he was dead.

Mr. Gao was a dynamic advocate, pushing constitutional reform and representing controversial cases like the Falun Gong spiritual movement. But in a sometimes tearful interview with The Associated Press last week, he announced that he would abandon activism in hopes of being able to reunite with his family. "I don't have the capacity to persevere," he said.

Mr. Gao refused to discuss his ordeal, but we have no reason not to assume the worst. He was jailed on two previous occasions, and he later described his brutal torture by police, including electric shocks to his genitals.

This latest disappearance has been devastating for Mr. Gao and his family, which had been under constant police surveillance for years. Press reports said that his teenage daughter had tried to commit suicide. His wife and children escaped to the United States last year.

Chinese authorities also are doing their best to break two other men of conscience who are still being held. On Monday, family members said the government had rejected a request for a medical parole for Hu Jia, who has shown signs of possible liver cancer. He gained prominence fighting to protect AIDS patients, environmental causes and democratic rights before being charged two years ago with subverting state power.

In February, a Beijing appeals court upheld an 11-year sentence for Liu Xiaobo, who was convicted of subversion for helping organize the Charter 08 manifesto that called for sweeping political reforms.

Mr. Hu and Mr. Liu should be released from jail now. Mr. Gao should be permitted to reunite with his family. Perhaps Mr. Gao can one day again take up the struggle for human rights and justice. He certainly does not have to apologize for "disappointing" his supporters as he did during his interview. Nothing Beijing's autocrats may say or do can take away his legacy of courage in the face of repression.

South China Morning Post

Professor with two children is sacked University fires critic of the one-child policy

Will Clem in Shanghai

Apr 12, 2010

A prominent legal scholar and strong critic of the mainland's family planning policies has been fired from his university for breaking the controversial one-child policy.

Yang Zhizhu was formally dismissed on Friday from his post as assistant professor at China Youth University for Political Sciences in Beijing. His wife gave birth to their second child in December.

Yang, who is looking for work in Wuhan, Hubei, said he was resigned to losing his job. "There really isn't anything I can do about the situation," he said.

A campaign against Beijing's birth-control policy is gaining momentum. Yang is the highest-profile person to be punished so far.

He said he had been told to expect to be fired when he was given an oral warning on March 26.

The letter said the university was terminating his position with immediate effect. It was also halting payments of his single-child family bonus and demanding that he return all the bonuses he had received.

Yang has long been an outspoken critic of the mainland's family planning policies, and has written extensively on the subject in his blog and in opinion pieces in the media.

He described the university's decision to terminate his contract as "severe" and said he believed it did not have a sound legal basis.

"Looking closely at the letter, one can tell there is no clear basis for the school disciplining me like this," he said. "That is the reason they don't say which law, which regulation or which legal document they are basing the disciplinary proceedings on."

Yang said family planning laws entitled a work unit to discipline employees who had children without permission, but there were no guidelines for what form that punishment should take.

He said his actions had also not been in breach of teaching regulations or broken the terms of his employment contract. "My having a [second] child did not take up any of my working hours, nor does it have any impact on the content of my lectures," he said.

However, Yang said he had no plans to take the issue to court because he felt the university was acting "against its own wishes". "My guess is that the university did not want to handle my problem like this. My actions have caused a lot of hassles for the university, heads of the law department, and family planning workers and staff at the Yiqingyuan community residents' committee, and for that I am deeply sorry. But I don't regret anything."

A rights organisation warned that mainland leaders appeared to be introducing a zero-tolerance policy towards activists.

"Police are increasing their efforts to harass and intimidate human rights activists," Renee Xia, international director of Chinese Human Rights Defenders, said.

The press release was issued after police in Beijing detained activist Gu Chuan for seven hours on Friday. A dozen officers searched Gu's home for two hours.

The Globe and Mail, Canada

China's 'African land grab'

What if Beijing's 'invasion' could be a major development opportunity for farmers in Africa?

Column

Doug Saunders

In the fertile lands south of the Sahara, the huge green apparitions have become an increasingly familiar sight. After crossing the long stretches of the dun-coloured wasteland and the tiny, emaciated peasant plots that make up much of Africa's countryside, you're suddenly confronted with a huge expanse of green, robust crops doused in modern irrigation, worked with tractors and scattered with scores of field workers.

Here is the most visible face of Beijing's powerful presence in Africa. Virtually unnoticed by people outside, Chinese companies have spent the past two years accumulating millions of hectares of African farmland.

Since 2008, when worldwide food shortages and a boom in biofuels suddenly made farming an attractive target for investment again, at least 20 million hectares – and possibly as much as 100 million – have been leased by foreigners (actual buying is rare) in Africa. On one hand, you can see the appeal: Africa has the cheapest arable land in the world, valued at an average of \$800 a hectare.

Many of these deals are being done by China – how much, we don't know, because record-keeping is sketchy. Persian Gulf countries and Europeans are also making big agricultural investments in Africa, but China's getting the attention because it's moved in with so much money and because it's a poor and authoritarian developing country whose motives and methods are widely distrusted.

Indeed, if you picked up an African newspaper this week, you'd likely have seen cries of protest at this Chinese incursion, one that's being portrayed as an "African land grab" and a "new scramble for Africa" – both references to Europe's catastrophic colonial theft of African resources in the past two centuries. A coalition of activist groups has organized to fight such deals and keep the land in African hands.

But it's worth taking a second look. People see the Chinese as moving into Africa, kicking poor farmers off their land, and growing food to be shipped back to China for domestic consumption. This seems unlikely, however. China already produces far more food than it needs, and its agricultural productivity is increasing. What it does have is \$2-trillion (U.S.) in foreign-exchange reserves that it realizes it ought to invest more widely. African farms are a great bargain for investors who don't mind risk; they can be turned into high-output and, therefore, high-profit operations.

Scholars who've examined China's Africa policy have found not a desire for immediate returns but a longer-term interest in developing the continent's infrastructure, training, management and investment to the point that yields will be far higher.

This happens to be exactly what African farms need. Whether someone from another continent can deliver it is an open question, but we shouldn't be so quick to assume the worst.

Hunger and malnutrition afflict most of Africa's countries, which, despite having some of the most fertile land in the world, are net importers of food. This is purely a matter of productivity. In crops such as corn, African farms are typically producing between 30 and 60 bushels a hectare; North American and European farms get 120 to 160 bushels from the same hectare because of better technology and investment.

We have just lived through a 15-year period during which per capita African food production fell by 8 per cent, while it increased in Asia by more than 25 per cent. If what happened in Europe a century ago and what's happening in Asia now can be made to happen in Africa, then one of the world's most serious problems could be solved.

The only major analysis of foreign farm investment in Africa was recently completed by Lorenzo Cotula and his colleagues at the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development. Titled Land Grab or Development Opportunity, it found that, on the whole, there can be much more of the latter than the former if the deals are done right.

The result could be something like the shift that transformed European farming a century and a half ago: a move from hand-to-mouth subsistence farming to commercial farming that produces five times more food, employs many more people at far better wages than peasant earnings, and puts an end to rural poverty, which is currently the world's largest killer of people.

Ugandan development economist Dick Kamuganga found that, if deals with foreigners are made to contract out the farming itself to local small-hold farmers (a practice that economists generally agree produces higher yields anyway), the result could "deliver the investment capital, technical know-how, jobs to local farmers and predictable food security for Africa." If it takes a Chinese invasion to do it, it still might be worth it.

Monday, Apr. 05, 2010

China 'Miracle': 115 Trapped Miners Rescued

By AP / GILLIAN WONG

(XIANGNING, China) — More than 100 Chinese miners were pulled out alive Monday after being trapped for over a week in a flooded coal mine, where some ate sawdust and strapped themselves to the shafts' walls with their belts to avoid drowning while they slept.

Rescued miners wrapped in blankets, some with their light-sensitive eyes covered but their feet bare, were hurried to waiting ambulances that sped wailing to nearby hospitals. One clapped on his stretcher and reached out his blackened hands to grasp those of rescuers on either side. (See pictures of China's drought.)

Rescuers in tears hugged each other at the scene, which was broadcast live on national television. The sudden surge in rescues was a rare piece of good news for China's mining industry, the deadliest in the world. A rescue spokesman said 115 survivors had been pulled out as of 4:30 p.m. local time (0830 GMT; 4:30 a.m. EDT).

"A miracle has finally happened," Liu Dezheng told reporters Monday morning, after the first nine miners were taken out shortly after midnight. "We believe that more miracles will happen."

Rescuers have been pumping water out of the flooded mine since last Sunday, when workers digging a tunnel broke into an old shaft filled with water. The first signs of life from underground came Friday,

when tapping could be heard coming up the pipes. Divers first headed into the tunnels over the weekend but found high, murky water and emerged empty-handed.

As the water level continued to drop, rescuers with rubber rafts squeezed through the narrow, low-ceilinged passages late Sunday and pulled out the first nine survivors just after midnight. Eleven hours later, the large wave of rescues began.

The miners had spent eight days underground and some were soaked through. Some had hung from shaft walls by their belts for days to avoid falling into the water when asleep. Later, they climbed into a mining cart that floated by.

One miner described eating sawdust and tree bark and drinking the murky water, the leader of one of the rescue teams, Chen Yongheng, told a press conference Monday afternoon.

As the rafts approached the first trapped miners, one of them asked, "Can you get me out of here?"

Liu Qiang, a medical officer involved in the rescue, said the survivors had hypothermia, severe dehydration and skin infections from being in the water so long. Some also were in shock and had low blood pressure.

"This is probably one of the most amazing rescues in the history of mining anywhere," said David Feickert, a coal mine safety adviser to the Chinese government.

A total of 153 workers had been trapped, and there was no word Monday afternoon on the status of the 38 miners still underground. Chen said two or three of the underground mine platforms had not yet been checked. Conditions remained complicated by high murky water.

Families of the survivors were thrilled. "He called and managed to say my sister's nickname, 'Xiaomi,' so we know it's really him and that he's alive," said Long Liming, who said he received a call around midday from his rescued brother-in-law Fu Ziyang.

A doctor then took the phone and said Fu had to rest, Long said. "He was trapped underground for so long, so he's very weak. But we are very relieved to know that he made it out safely."

Officials said most of the rescued miners were in stable condition, but state television said seven were in serious condition.

In a sign of government concerns over possible social unrest, family members of the trapped miners said they have been kept under close watch in hotels and are not allowed to leave unless accompanied by minders.

The first rescue early Monday morning had seemed beyond hope for days before crews finally heard tapping from deep underground Friday.

Rescuers then scrambled to understand the complicated situation underground and send down packages of glucose, milk and letters of encouragement. One read: "Dear fellow workers, the Party Central Committee, the State Council and the whole nation have been concerned for your safety all the time.... You must have confidence and hold on to the last!"

Some workers appeared to be trapped on upper platforms of the mine; their access to the entrance of the V-shaped shaft was blocked by an area swamped with water.

"The situation underground was a bit more complicated than we predicted," Luo Lin, the director of the State Administration for Work Safety, told state television.

It was unclear Monday how deep into the mine the rescued workers had been found.

"The miners in the lowest levels will be in the most extreme danger," Feickert said. "Just think of a tall building, with people on different floors, if that suddenly filled up with water."

China Central Television said one of the newly rescued workers still was holding his mining lamp.

A preliminary investigation last week found that the mine's managers ignored water leaks before the accident, the State Administration of Work Safety said.

China's coal mines are the world's deadliest. Accidents killed 2,631 coal miners in China last year, down from 6,995 deaths in 2002, the most dangerous year on record, according to the State Administration of Coal Mine Safety.

* Associated Press researcher Henry Hou in Beijing contributed to this report.

AsiaNews - www.asianews.it

04/14/2010 10:01

CHINA

Earthquake on the Tibetan plateau: At least 300 dead

The area is the border between Qinghai and Tibet. Victims among the Tibetans. Rescue operations difficult because the area is remote.

Beijing (AsiaNews / Agencies) - An earthquake measuring 7.1 hit the area of Qinghai (northwest China) this morning killing at least 300 people and injured more than 8 thousand. Many others are still trapped under the rubble of collapsed houses. The area is in the Tibetan plateau and is inhabited by many Tibetan ethnic groups.

In several cities, especially in the Yushu area, low brick buildings were destroyed, police and residents are working to extract the wounded from under the collapsed buildings. The remoteness of the area from major population centers makes it difficult for rescue operations.

The epicenter of the earthquake occurred 240 km north-northwest from Qamdo, Tibet and 375 km south-southeast of the mining town of Golmud in Qinghai at a depth of 10 km.

The Tibetan plateau is regularly shaken by earthquakes, but the victims are usually few because there are no high concentrations of population. In May 2008, the south-east of Qinghai and Tibet, an earthquake in Sichuan killed 80 thousand people.

The Times
April 6, 2010

Analysis: the most dangerous job on earth

Jane Macartney, China Correspondent

Working in a Chinese coal mine is one of the most dangerous jobs on Earth, though nothing like as risky as it used to be.

A decade ago as many as 10,000 Chinese miners were killed each year. Last year the total was 2,631 — a fall of 584 from 2008. It still amounted to about seven people a day. In 2006 as many as 13 miners perished in China every day.

The authorities are trying to improve safety in an industry crucial to keeping China's economic juggernaut turning. But since coal accounts for 70 per cent of the country's energy needs — and pit owners receive hefty profits — the temptations to cut corners are enormous.

This is one reason why the Government has clamped down on private mines, closing thousands over the past two years. About 70 per cent of all deaths are in privately owned collieries and, as many have closed, the overall safety record has improved.

But enforcement is far from perfect in a system where local officials are easy prey to coal entrepreneurs who wine and dine them and slip across envelopes stuffed with cash so that they turn a blind eye to safety shortcomings and dodgy work practices.

The publicity surrounding the latest accident, and the deployment of at least 5,000 rescue workers and support teams — as well as police and the military to maintain order — highlights official determination to improve the reputation of the mines.

The rescue of more than 100 trapped miners may restore a little confidence in an industry tarnished by too many tragedies.

The New Zealand Herald, NZ

Yahoo accounts hacked, claim China-based journalists

By Anita Chang
7:51 AM Wednesday Mar 31, 2010

BEIJING - Yahoo email accounts belonging to foreign journalists appeared to have been hacked and Google's Chinese search engine was intermittently blocked yesterday, the latest troubles in China's heavily censored internet market.

The Yahoo accounts of at least three journalists and an analyst became inaccessible over the last few weeks. They were greeted with messages saying, "We've detected an issue with your account" and were told to contact Yahoo, they said.

Yahoo techs told one of the four that his account had been hacked and restored his access, but it was not clear if the other instances were related.

Sensitivity about internet security has run high since Google announced in January it might leave China after a series of cyberattacks and complaints about censorship.

Last week, Google made a partial retreat, shutting down its mainland-based search engine and redirecting those queries offshore, to the freer Chinese territory of Hong Kong.

Analysts have been watching closely to see if China retaliates for Google's high-profile departure from the mainland search engine market.

Many redirected queries appeared blocked yesterday on the Hong Kong-based search engine. Searches for benign terms were met with results on Chinese competitors such as Baidu.com and Soso.com, however, an error page would pop up when typed into Google.com.hk.

Dozens of China-based Twitter users posted updates saying they were having the same problem. But it wasn't immediately clear what was causing the glitch.

Zhou Shuguang, a Beijing-based writer who blogs under the name "Zuola," said he tried to search the word "pest" using several search engines. Only Google.com.hk returned an error message.

"The connection was reset,' it says. It's the same for all the terms I put in," said Zhou. He thought it might be a technical problem but if it isn't fixed in a day or so, "then maybe it means China has blocked it."

Beijing-based Google spokeswoman Marsha Wang said she would look into the reports but didn't immediately respond.

It was not clear where problems with the Yahoo email accounts originated from. All four people affected are professionally focused on China and related issues. They said they had heard of other colleagues having similar problems, including one journalist who lost his Yahoo account entirely in January.

Clifford Coonan, China correspondent for The Independent and the Irish Times newspapers, said he received the "issue with your account" notice when he logged in yesterday. Another reporter said she received repeated error messages from Yahoo last month.

The Western analyst said he was locked out of his account for four or five days, until he spoke with a Yahoo representative who went through the security questions and restarted it.

"He said somebody had hacked into my registration details," said the analyst, who would not give his name citing the sensitivity of the issue. The analyst said he was concerned hackers may have also accessed his inbox.

Yahoo officials in Asia and London declined to comment, referring queries to headquarters in Sunnyvale, California.

"I'd just be interested to see if anyone in the business community or outside of journalism and academia has had the same problem, then it might be less sinister," Coonan said. "It's obviously annoying but if it's just journalists and academics, that's scary."

- AP

By Anita Chang
