

Outrage Grows Over Air Pollution and China's Response



Jason Lee/Reuters

Paramilitary police officers practiced drills inside the Forbidden City during a night heavy with haze and smog in central Beijing on Sunday.

By [EDWARD WONG](#)

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BEIJING — The statement posted online along with a photograph of central Beijing muffled in a miasma of brown haze did not mince words: “The end of the world is imminent.”



[Beijing's Smoggy Skies](#)

The ceaseless churning of factories and automobile engines in and around Beijing has led to this: hundreds of flights canceled since Sunday because of smog, stores sold out of face masks, and many Chinese complaining on the Internet that officials are failing to level with them about air quality or make any improvements to the environment.

[Chronic pollution in Beijing](#), temporarily scrubbed clean for the 2008 Summer Olympics, has made people angry for a long time, but the disruptions it causes to daily life are now raising questions about the economic cost, and the government's ability to ensure the safety of the population.

“As a Chinese citizen, we have been kept in the dark on this issue for too long,” said Yu Ping, the father of a 7-year-old boy, who has started a public campaign to demand that officials report more accurately about Beijing’s air quality. “The government is just so bureaucratic that they don’t seem to care whether we common people live or die. And it’s up to us, the common people, to prod them and to put pressure on them so that they can reflect on their actions and realize that they really just have to do something.”

When the frustration of parents boils over, Communist Party leaders start worrying about their legitimacy in the eyes of the people. That was the case in 2008 when parents vented anger over deadly school collapses in the Sichuan earthquake and over adulterated milk.

The motionless cloud of pollution that has smothered the capital and its surroundings in recent days has frayed tempers. Long stretches of highway have been shut down because of low visibility, hobbling transportation of people and goods. Workers at Capital International Airport have faced crowds of irate travelers whose flights have been grounded. From Sunday to 11 a.m. Tuesday, more than 700 outbound and inbound flights were canceled, one airport official said. A tour guide, Wang Lanhuizi, 23, clutched dozens of passports from a stranded group. “I’m really worried, but there’s nothing we can do,” she said.

An announcement at the airport made no mention of pollution, attributing the cancellations and delays to “the weather condition.” That has long been the government line: the haze is fog, not fumes. But increasingly, Chinese know better. People like Mr. Yu, a newspaper editor, are lobbying officials to stop whitewashing their air quality reports.

Many people now follow a [Twitter feed](#) from the United States Embassy that gives hourly updates on air quality; gauges on top of the embassy in central Beijing measure, among other things, the amount of fine airborne particles, which are extremely damaging to the lungs. Since Sunday, the air has been rated “very unhealthy” or “hazardous,” meaning that people should avoid any outdoor activity; on Sunday, the particulate measurement exceeded the scale’s maximum of 500, a reading that the embassy once called “crazy bad” on its @BeijingAir Twitter feed.

The fine particles, called PM 2.5 because they are 2.5 microns in diameter or smaller, make up much of the pollution in the city, but they are not included in the air quality ratings issued by the Chinese government. The published ratings take into account only a larger class of particles (up to 10 microns in diameter) called PM 10. As a result, Beijing officials have announced good or excellent air quality nearly 80 percent of the time over the last two years, while the embassy’s assessment says the air was unhealthy more than 80 percent of the time, [according to an analysis](#) by Steven Q. Andrews, an American environmental consultant, that was published Monday on the Web site [China Dialogue](#).

Experts say the filthy air shortens lives in the capital. One authoritative study “indicates that if Beijing’s fine particulate concentration even reached the polluted levels of Los Angeles, life expectancy may increase by over five years,” Mr. Andrews wrote.

The air readings from the embassy mysteriously stopped on Tuesday afternoon. “We’re checking on it,” the embassy spokesman, Richard L. Buangan, said on Twitter. (Although Twitter is blocked in China, the embassy’s air quality ratings are reposted by many Chinese on unblocked sites.)

In July 2009, a Chinese Foreign Ministry official, Wang Shu’ai, told American diplomats to halt the embassy’s air quality Twitter feed, saying that the data “is not only confusing but also insulting,” according to [a State Department cable](#) obtained by WikiLeaks. The embassy’s data, Mr. Wang said, could lead to “social consequences.”

Chinese officials recently acknowledged that Beijing and other cities have the equipment to measure PM 2.5, the smaller particles, but do not reflect that data in their air quality ratings.

Prominent Beijing residents have called for changes. One is Pan Shiyi, a real estate magnate who asked his seven million microblog followers last month to vote on whether the authorities should use a stricter standard to assess air quality. Officials have not been helped by [news reports](#) that revealed that a Chinese manufacturer, the Broad Group, advertises that more than 200 of its pricey air purifiers are in the offices and homes of China’s top leaders.

Ma Jun, an environmental advocate, said officials made some progress this year by committing to ensuring that cities report PM 2.5 data starting in 2016. But that is too far away, he said.

Mr. Yu, the editor, is pushing for immediate disclosure of the data. His campaign has attracted attention online this week as Beijing residents cough and [squint](#) in the haze. Mr. Yu said he filed an application to the Beijing Environmental Protection Bureau last month to have the bureau release PM 2.5 data, and was turned down; he posted the bureau’s answer on his microblog. He said he was considering suing the bureau or asking the Ministry of Environmental Protection for a review. “With the government not being totally open about this issue,” he said, “many people don’t realize how bad the situation is.”

On Tuesday, the English-language China Daily [published](#) an article under the headline “Exposure to Smog Is Severe Hazard.” It said the lung [cancer](#) rate in Beijing had increased by 60 percent in the last decade even though the [smoking](#) rate did not change.

Li Bibo and Edy Yin contributed research.