

# Millions forfeit water to Olympic Games

## Farmers in Baoding face ruin from a man-made drought

Michael Sheridan, China

THOUSANDS of Chinese farmers face ruin because their water has been cut off to guarantee supplies to the Olympics in Beijing, and officials are now trying to cover up a grotesque scandal of blunders, lies and repression.

In the capital, foreign dignitaries have admired millions of flowers in bloom and lush, well-watered greens around its famous sights. But just 90 minutes south by train, peasants are hacking at the dry earth as their crops wilt, their money runs out and the work of generations gives way to despair, debt and, in a few cases, suicide.

In between these two Chinas stands a cordon of roadblocks and hundreds of security agents deployed to make sure that the one never sees the other.

The water scandal is a parable of what can happen when a demanding global event is awarded to a poor agricultural nation run by a dictatorship; and the irony is that none of it has turned out to be necessary.

The blunders began when officials started to worry that Beijing might not have enough water to cope with 500,000 visitors to the Olympics. There was talk of a 30% spike in demand. Their gaze turned to Hebei province, its fields ripe with vegetables, corn and rice, providing a good living for its huge rural population.

Decrees were issued, targets were set and engineers scurried to complete a "100day struggle" to build almost 200 miles of channels and pipes to Beijing. These will form part of a gigantic project to bring the waters of the Yangtze River to the drought-stricken plains of northern China. Meanwhile, four strategic reservoirs in Hebei, around the city of Baoding, were filled to the brim.

Accounts differ of what happened next. Some farmers say the price of water was raised by 300% to put it beyond their reach. Others simply say that their irrigation channels ran dry. As subterranean water levels fell, their wells collapsed, fields were abandoned, mud-brick farm houses stood empty.

About 31,000 people around Baoding are said to have lost their homes or land. Local leaders complained; China's tiny environmental movement agitated. That all stopped when the Hebei media trotted out a barrage of propaganda assuring readers that the entire population was overjoyed to be making a sacrifice for the national good.

To piece together what happened, The Sunday Times interviewed more than 20 farmers, water engineers and officials in the counties of Tangxian, Man-cheng and Shunping.

"There was a great rush to build the local section of the canal but suddenly, in the spring, it stopped," said a water engineer. "Actually, we haven't sent a drop to Beijing."

Sure enough, the great concrete canal lay empty but for a pool of rainwater. It stretched to the horizon through greenery shaded brown with dust.

The story was repeated everywhere. Half-built aqueducts, pipes that disgorged a murky trickle, untapped reservoirs where water gleamed just a pebble throw from parched fields. By every account, the building stopped soon after an uprising in Tibet led to world-wide protests during the Olympic torch relay and calls for a boycott of the Games.

It became clear to the Chinese government that the number of tourists would be much fewer than expected. They also decided, in effect, to expel a host of migrant workers from the capital. Many residents opted to shun the oppressive security measures and left town. Beijing no longer needed the water.

Nobody bothered to relieve the plight of the hapless farmers. "Our streams and rivers have no water," said a farmer called Wang Duchuan, 30, "How can we grow rice? We don't even have enough water for corn."

"Before, we dug a well two metres deep and got water. Now we dig 10 metres deep and get nothing," said another.

Several farmers got into debt to moneylenders and killed themselves by drinking pesti-cide, local people said. Incomes for a family in Hebei province can be as low as £1 a day.

Rather than change policy, resume the supply and lose face, officials resorted to repression. For a sleepy agricultural centre, Baoding had an extraordinary number of policemen on duty. Roadblocks prevented any unauthorised vehicles going north to Beijing. Taxi drivers were given a printed order that any “unusual” passengers should be driven straight to the police.

Armed police checked cars at 10 points along one road to a reservoir. At each stop, a banner proclaimed “Olympic Security Checkpoint”, although the Games themselves were more than 100 miles away. Posters offered a reward of more than £7,000 for “special Olympic information” given to the Public Security Bureau.

At a city hotel, the staff at the front desk arose aghast when I entered to ask for a room, then immediately telephoned the authorities. Deciding to forgo the pleasure of their acquaintance, I made my excuses and left Baoding.

As I waited at the railway station, the only foreigner in a reeking hall crammed with shabby migrants, a young man in a perfectly ironed green polo shirt and polished black shoes came and sat opposite, apparently engrossed in a newspaper.

A few minutes later a second young man, in a neat purple T-shirt and equally shiny shoes, sat down nearby and stared into space. A third fellow, this time in a pink polo shirt, materialised in the heaving throng next to me as we tramped towards the night express, murmuring into a mobile phone. After I climbed on board they vanished.

Yet another red banner, strung across the interior of our packed carriage, read: “The five Olympic rings include you and me.”

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