

## MY SAY: The new champions

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China proudly commemorated 60 years of Communist Party rule last week with what seemed to be the largest celebration the country had ever witnessed. To use a phrase coined during the recent World Economic Forum in Dalian, China has pointedly distinguished itself as one of the "new champions" of the day.

Maybe, as also mentioned during the forum, this is because the republic recognised the fact that "the teachers have made big mistakes" — referring to the West's chief role in the global financial and economic fiasco — leaving it with the clear option to lead.

Unfortunately, "the teachers" have been responsible for more than the current financial woes. This fact struck home when representatives of the world's biggest carbon polluters met in Washington recently. This time, it seems, the "big mistakes" are widespread, not least in China, which, analysts are predicting, will face an enormous cost to reduce emissions in the coming decades. A sum of more than US\$400 billion a year has been estimated to curb greenhouse gas production in China alone over the next 20 years.

It was recently revealed that the number of newborn babies with birth defects had surged in the republic, partly due to environmental pollution, according to the Chinese state media. Physical abnormalities, such as congenital heart defects or cleft lips, recorded a nearly twofold increase since 1997. Nationwide, of the 20 million babies born yearly, about 4% to 6% have defects, according to a news report.



Once an isolated haven, the Chinese village of Liukuai is now an isolated hell, surrounded by dozens of belching factories that are poisoning its water and air, and slowly killing off its inhabitants.

The reproductive health institute at Peking University remarked that chemical and toxic emissions, apart from climate change, are likely to impact the health of the unborn.

According to the *International Herald Tribune* (Sept 18), "cancer villages" are being identified around hamlets inundated by heavy metal pollution in various parts of China. The most common cancers, it seems, are of the stomach, liver, kidney and colon, accounting for up to 85% of cases.

A report, entitled "Environmental and People's Health in China" and published by the WHO and the UNDP (2001), says, "where communities depend largely on ponds or lakes for drinking water, the rates of digestive system cancer are very high".

Some say these waters bring death rather than sustenance. "All the fish died. Even chickens and ducks that drank from the river died," commented an observer. Still others are worried that the food chain is tainted as well.

Not long ago, China reported more cases of children down with lead poisoning from a battery plant. This was in addition to other cases reported throughout the year, including one in August in which more than a thousand children living near smelting plants were found to have excessive amounts of lead in their blood. Most of them were under the age of 14.

These atrocities are not exclusive to China, of course. They will occur wherever greedy-for-profit factories are allowed to damage the ecosystem. Indeed, in a special joint appeal in the *British Medical Journal* and *The Lancet*, the heads of a number of medical associations urged governments to act decisively to mitigate the risks arising from malnutrition due to drought, the threat of cholera from flooding and the spread of mosquito-

borne diseases in temperate zones.

Overall, the impact will be "catastrophic" if response remains dismal. Malaysia is one of the signatories of the appeal, which insists that health professionals take the lead in speaking out since sustainable development is now part of ensuring sustainable health.

Meanwhile, greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise unabated globally. UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon, upon visiting the Arctic to witness first-hand the collapse of an ice mass, said: "Climate change is the pre-eminent geopolitical issue of our time. It rewrites the global equation for development, peace and prosperity. It threatens markets, economies and development gains. And the alternative: sustainable growth based on green technologies and policies that favour low emissions over current carbon-intensive models."

For this, we truly need "the new champions" because "the teachers" have shown time and again that their model of growth and development is defective. Meanwhile, time is running out as underscored by Ban: "The Arctic is melting faster than human progress to preserve it."

Quick action is needed to prevent the depletion of food and water supplies, the provocation of conflict and migration and destabilised and fragile societies and governments.

So, as we wish China a prosperous future, we fervently hope that as one of the "new champions", it will prove to be a better teacher than the others and a role model to emulate and learn from to create a peaceful and enduring world.

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