

Ancient Chinese irrigation system stands test of time and quake

AFP, Dujiangyan, China

High above the world's oldest operating irrigation system, Zhang Shuanggun, a local villager, stands on an observation platform cranked by China's massive earthquake last week.

She has a simple answer for why the ancient, bamboo-based Dujiangyan irrigation system sustained only minor damage, while nearby modern dams and their vast amounts of concrete are now under 24-hour watch for signs of collapse.

"This ancient project is perfection," Zhang said.

From the hillside platform, the workings of the ingenious irrigation project that is now a UNESCO World Heritage-listed site are clearly visible.

Built from 256 BC, the system involved diverting the Minjiang River's flow using man-made islands built on bamboo frames that

allowed water and fish to flow freely underneath.

UNESCO, the United Nations cultural organisation, says the system "controls the waters of the Minjiang River and distributes it to the fertile farmland of the plains.

It is "a major landmark in the development of water management and technology and is still discharging its functions perfectly."

The irrigation system is at the foot of mountains on the edge of Dujiangyan, about 50 kilometres from the epicentre of the May 12 quake which measured 8.0 on the Richter scale and killed more than 40,000 people.

Yet despite its close proximity to the quake, the system suffered only minor damage and was not compromised, according to the government.

At the same time, several dams were damaged by the earthquake and are now under constant watch

for signs of collapse amid concerns they may not be able to withstand strong aftershocks or flooding.

"The earthquake this time has caused damage at various levels to reservoirs and dams," Gu Junyuan, the chief engineer at the State Electricity Regulatory Commission said this week.

"Dam safety experts have been put in place to monitor the operation of the dams 24 hours a day."

Thousands of people have been evacuated in various areas of quake-hit Sichuan province due to fears of bursting dams.

Qushan, a major town that suffered major damage in the quake, is being relocated altogether partly because of the threat that a dam above it will collapse and send torrents of water through the area.

The contrasting fates of the ancient irrigation system and the modern dams offer a cautionary tale for China as it continues its love

affair with trying to tame its vast rivers.

Hundreds of dams have been built, or are being constructed, across the country, and environmentalists have repeatedly warned of the folly of doing so in quake-prone areas such as Sichuan.

But no one has such fears about the Dujiangyan irrigation project.

"The irrigation system is reliable and solid," said He Qiyun, 66, a woman who lives above the project in hills which are prone to rock falls since the quake.

"The skills of the ancient people, the architect, were so high," said another area resident, a former village Communist Party secretary who declined to give his name.

He was resting outside the now-closed ornamental gate through which tourists would normally visit the irrigation project.

From above, the project looks deceptively simple.

The river splits around a heavily forested and slightly curved island about one kilometre long.

At the top of the island, a protrusion which residents call the "fish mouth" pokes into the river and helps it divide. On one side is a modern dam with flood gates through which the river passes.

On the other is a narrower channel which flows towards the plain where it waters the fields of Xu Shifu and other farmers.

"Yes, it comes from there," Xu, 52, said, leaning on a hoe beside his brown fields of wheat almost ready for harvest. "It's a small tributary... it's originally from the fish mouth."

While his wife planted corn seedlings along the edge of the wheat field, Xu explained that if his paddy needs extra water, it could be directed into his fields through a system linked to the ancient water works.



Media personality Shykh Siraj administers polio vaccine to a child at the 13th socio-psychological and healthcare programme at Chandanaish upazila in Chittagong yesterday.

Pak children in danger from food crisis: Unicef

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government must take urgent action to protect children from the effects of the global food crisis, a senior UN children's fund official said yesterday.

"These children are in danger and we need to devise ways to respond to the crisis and save them," David Toole, regional director of Unicef South Asia, told a press conference.

Toole, who was on a four-day visit to Pakistan as part of a South Asian tour, said during his meetings with government officials he called for "out-of-the-box" thinking to tackle spiralling food prices and shortages.

"The government should unveil incentives such as distribution of cash and other mechanisms available at his disposal for people with limited resources all over the country to minimise the impact of the wheat and rice shortage," he added.

"Efforts should also be focused on targeted food subsidies as well as on other comprehensive programmes to strengthen food production," Toole said. Pakistan's 160 million people have suffered from a huge increase in food prices as well as from shortages in wheat, the main dietary staple here, and rice.

Zonta Club Dhaka III executives

The Annual General Meeting (AGM) of Zonta Club of Dhaka III was held recently, says a press release.

The members of its executive committee for the biennium 2008-2010 were also elected following the meeting.

The office-bearers are President Ztn Rubina H Farouq, President Elect Ztn Momtaz Chowdhury, First Vice President Ztn Shaheda Ahmed, Second Vice President Ztn Naseema Hasan, Treasurer Ztn Rehana Ashraf, Recording Secretary Ztn Shirley C Momen, Corresponding Secretary Ztn Rubina Qadir Hussain, Directors Ztn Khadija Afzal, Ztn Meena Kalim, Ztn Fawzia Chowdhury, Ztn Imtiaz Rahman, Ztn Mahua Khair, Ztn Nasreen Khan and Nominating Committee Members Ztn Tamara Ali, chairman, Ztn Sonia Imran, Ztn Luna Doha, Ztn Rawiya Seraj, Ztn Naz Mostafa, Ztn Shaheda Mustafiz.



Bangladesh Sangbadik Kalyan Foundation awarded 'Journalist Abdul Kahhar Gold Medal' to 17 personalities at a programme in the city recently for their outstanding contribution to their respective fields. They are Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, poet Al Mahmud, Mosharruf Hossain, Abdul Jabbar, Monowara Hakim Ali, Naimul Islam Khan, Komruddin Heera, Barrister Tania Amir, Saiful Islam Bhuyian, Dr MS Imran Chowdhury, Syed Nazim Uddin, Bazlur Rahman, Prof Quamrun Nahar, Faruk-Uz-Zaman Hazari, Almas Ali, poet Alлама and AKM Saifuddin.

Govt hopeful of dialogues

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are not released before they go to the dialogue.

The adviser was talking to reporters following the inauguration of 13th annual convention of Lions Clubs International, District 315A1, Bangladesh at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the capital.

He said the government began the dialogue with full preparation, adding that the talks reflect the nation's aspiration to step forward.

"Bangladesh will stand out in the world and we've already gone a long way to that end. The Royal Bengal Tiger is now eager to jump," said Zillur who is on the panel of advisers holding the dialogue with the political parties.

He, however, noted that cooperation of all, including the citizens, private sector and NGOs, is important in this regard.

Lauding the Lions Clubs' contribution to health, education and

other services in the country, he said more efforts are needed in order to make good citizens and bring in a service-oriented leadership in every sphere of life.

"It is only a good leadership and good citizens who can ensure a prosperous society," he said, stressing the need for a culture of mutual respect and recognition.

There is every potential for Bangladesh to reach a high level because the forces required for this are present here, he said.

Public and private sectors, NGOs and voluntary social organisations are playing an important role in this end, Zillur said, adding that self-reliant social forces like the Lions Clubs should be strengthened for their role in the society.

He called upon the private sector to come up with ideas to utilise the government infrastructure meant for imparting vocational training in a bid to produce

skilled manpower for overseas jobs.

"In the education ministry we are examining how vocational training institutes can be best utilised. You can introduce new training courses on the basis of your experience at international levels."

On the Lion Clubs' appeal for a plot of land to establish a cancer hospital, the adviser said he would talk to authorities concerned about the issue.

Lions leaders said they should review their nature of work in the changed global scenario as prices of essential commodities are going up and sufferings of the people are deepening.

Convention Chairperson Dr MA Halim Patwary, Lion SK Kabir Hossain, Lion Omar Shafayat Kausar, Lion Kazi Akramuddin Ahmed, Lion Mobarak Hossain and Lion Shah Zakir Hossain also spoke on the occasion.

WB, UN agency chiefs to discuss food crisis

AFP, Tokyo

The World Bank, the World Food Organisation and other aid groups will hold an emergency meeting next week to discuss ways to deal with the global food crisis, a World Bank official said Friday.

Senior officials including World Bank president Robert Zoellick will meet Thursday on the sidelines of an African development conference in Yokohama, southwest of Tokyo, the Bank's Tokyo office chief Kazushige Taniguchi said.

Top officials from the UN World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) are also expected to attend, he said.

"This will be an opportunity to share awareness of short-term and longer-term challenges the world faces in food supply," he said.

"In addition to aid to countries in urgent need of food, we have to look at the longer term goal of boosting food production," he said.

"You may think that farmers would naturally increase production if food prices rise, but that logic doesn't work in Africa, which lacks public infrastructure, such as hedging of drastic moves in food prices," he said.

Healthcare awareness campaign for farmers

ABDULLAH AL MAHMUD, back from Chandanaish, Ctg

Japan-Bangladesh Friendship Hospital (JBFH) and Hridoye Mati O Manush yesterday organised the 13th socio-psychological and healthcare programme at Chandanaish upazila in Chittagong to provide medical services and raise awareness among farmers.

A medical camp was set up to provide group psychotherapy at the local high school ground of Boeeltali, a remote village some 46 km south of the port city.

A team of physicians and psychotherapists led by media personality Shykh Siraj of Channel-i took part in the healthcare programme.

Shykh Siraj and JBFH Chairman Dr Zonaid Shafique initiated the countrywide socio-psychological and healthcare campaign aiming at improving health and lot of farmers.

A total of 50 students and twenty farmers participated in the programme that began with administering polio vaccination to

two children in the morning.

Shykh Siraj replied to frequent queries relating agriculture and cultivation of the farmers at the orientation session where the local agriculture officials were also present.

Renowned Psychiatrist and writer Dr Mohit Kamal was present there to conduct group psychotherapy at the camp in order to create socio-psychological awareness among the farmers.

A team of 50 physicians led by JBFH Director (Admin) Mahubul Alam gave treatment and health services to 1500 farmers at the medical camp.

The medical team comprised Cardiac Specialist Dr MA Baki, JBFH Director and medicine specialist Dr MM Shahidullah, eye specialist Dr Jafor Khaled, gastro-antelologist Dr SM Ishak and gynaecologists Dr Shirin Fatema and Dr Dil Afroz, among others.

An elderly farmer, Sona Das, told this correspondent, "I don't want to miss the opportunity to consult a good doctor (specialist)

as we have got them among us today."

The organisers said the 50-member medical team comprising physical medicine and medicine specialists, gynaecologist, neurologist, rheumatologist, ENT, surgery and dental specialists have been visiting different remote areas since the programme was launched at Alir Bazar, a remote village in Comilla on January 20 this year.

A total of 26,600 farmers were provided medical consultation and services, while blood groups of some 42,400 were tested free of cost at the medical camp.

JBFH Director Mahubul Alam said under the programme, critical patients from rural areas are getting treatment at Jiban Keyha (lifebuoy), a special unit set up at JBFH in the capital.

Besides, with the help of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), two hotline numbers 10600 and 10601 were set up at JBFH to provide round-the-clock medical services to the farmers.

US probe to make perilous landing on Martian arctic

AFP, Washington

After a nine-month journey through space, the US probe Phoenix will land on the arctic surface of Mars tomorrow to dig for ice in a new quest for signs of life on the Red Planet.

Nasa's 420-million-dollar probe will become the first spacecraft to land on the Martian arctic surface and will stay there for a three-month mission.

After traveling 679 million kilometres through the cosmos, Phoenix will enter the top of the Martian atmosphere at around 2331 GMT, zipping in at 21,000 kilometres per hour to begin a perilous descent that will end with a soft landing seven minutes later.

But the US space agency's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California, which controls the mission, will have to wait an agonizing 15 minutes for the radio signal confirming the safe landing to reach Earth.

"This is not a trip to grandma's house. Putting a spacecraft safely

on Mars is hard and risky," said Ed Weiler, associate administrator for Nasa's Science Mission Directorate.

"We do believe that it's a risk worth taking," said Fuk Li, manager of Nasa's Mars Exploration program, "because I think that the science the mission will return with will be outstanding and we will open up a new chapter on how we understand Mars to be."

Since Mars exploration began in the 1970s, more than half, or 55 percent, of probes sent to the Red Planet have failed to reach their destination.

Like previous Mars landers, Phoenix is equipped with a thermal shield to slow its entry into the atmosphere and will deploy a parachute to slow its speed.

The probe will then fire up its thrusters to slow its descent to eight kilometers per hour (five miles per hour) and land on its three legs on the circumpolar region known as Vastitas Borealis -- akin to northern Canada in Earth latitude.

'Cancer train' offers uncertain route out of despair in India

AFP, Bathinda, India

In India the "cancer express" is a train on which cheap cancer treatment is offered on the move.

It's a 10-hour ride from a district in Punjab with a high prevalence of the disease blamed on excessive use of pesticides to a charity cancer hospital in neighbouring Rajasthan.

A study released last year, backed by the government pollution control body, found 103 people with cancer in a sample of 100,000 in one area of Bathinda region compared to 71 in an area nearby with lower pesticide contamination.

New Delhi's Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) found unacceptably high quantities of pesticides in blood samples from across the cotton-growing district.

The presence of the chemical lindane -- a "possible cancer-causing substance" used in pesticides and insecticides and banned in several countries -- was found

to be 605 times higher in Bathinda than in the United States.

Both studies called for the regulation of pesticide use and pointed out a dire need for further research. There are no national figures for cancer prevalence in India.

"The situation is absolutely frightening. And it's not just cancer that people are suffering from," said scientist SG Kabra, who is leading a study on the effect of pesticides.

Local doctors say kidney problems, skin infections, heart attacks, birth defects, premature greying of children's hair and reproductive disorders have shot up dramatically since the mid-1990s.

At the Bathinda town station, almost every other group waiting on the platform is undertaking the same journey.

"We meet many cancer patients on this train. It gives us comfort and strength when we see others who have recovered," says

Singh's daughter-in-law Balwinder Kaur, who is making the trip for a fifth time.

A few feet away, 55-year-old Joginder Kaur sleeps on a bedsheet spread on the concrete, watched over by her daughter-in-law and brother-in-law.

"The doctors have asked us to come every 22 days," says brother-in-law Phool Singh, taking Kaur for the fourth time to the Bikaner hospital in Rajasthan.

Cancer treatment at private hospitals is prohibitive even for the affluent, while state-run hospitals provide only basic services, leaving most with little choice but to undertake the 400-kilometre journey to the low-cost Acharya Tulsi Region Cancer Centre in Bikaner.

Despite the relative prosperity of Punjab many still struggle to buy medicines.

"We have to spend 70 rupees daily for the two of them," says Charanjeet Kaur, whose parents-in-law have cancer. Two of their extended family have already died

of tumours.

"Since 2001, around 40 people have died of cancer in our village," said another family member and activist Jarnail Singh in the region's Jajjal village, which has a population of nearly 3,000.

One of the 19 districts of Punjab, Bathinda with a population of over a million, forms part of the region's cotton belt, where cancer is said to be widely prevalent.

Cotton is planted just a few days after wheat is harvested and back-to-back cultivation gives insects an opportunity to thrive on the farm, farmers say.

Worldwide, cotton requires extensive use of pesticides, but Punjab farmers used an unprecedented scale in the mid-1980s after hybrid seeds were introduced to boost output.

"We have 10 acres of land. In one year, we sprayed pesticides worth 60,000 rupees and got a yield worth 70,000 rupees," said Jarnail Singh, who first drew the

attention of the authorities to the health problems.

Farmers say pesticides were needed only in small quantities when native cotton seeds were used.

"Agriculture scientists used to bring these private, multinational companies in the 1980s and they would push the use of pesticides," Singh said.

Hybrid seeds would attract several types of pests, and required a combination of up to four pesticides, which made the pests more immune and led to greater pesticide use.

And when the American bollworm destroyed crops on a large scale in 2000 even the neighbourhood shopkeeper was selling pesticides, according to Singh.

"Farmers sold their jewellery, land, everything to buy pesticide and save their crop," the 67-year-old farmer added.

The chemicals contaminated ground water and food and directly affected farmers and farm

labourers, many of whom used them indiscriminately without reading instructions.

But now, the "cancer epidemic" has motivated nearly 1,000 farmers to turn to chemical-free "natural farming" -- which emphasises the use of traditional Indian methods of farming.

"Our Indian farmer is an agriculture scientist, water specialist, marketing professional -- all rolled into one. We don't need experts who have destroyed our agriculture," said the natural farming movement's founder Umendra Dutt.

Under the practice, farmers use native seeds, fertilisers and "pesticides" made of cow dung and urine, and efficient local irrigation methods.

While chemical farming requires inputs worth at least 3,000 rupees per acre, natural farming costs not more than 100 rupees, farmers say.

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