Another Mass Relocation Planned in Three Gorges Area

On August 21, the Chongqing municipal government reviewed a draft guideline concerning the social and economic development of northeast Chongqing area. The final document will be published soon after government approval, an official with the Chongqing Development and Reform Commission said in early September.

An important part of the guideline outlines the mass relocation of people from the northeast area into the Chongqing city proper or its Wanzhou District.

The northeast region covers 11 districts and counties in the Three Gorges Reservoir area.

This is the second mass relocation in the reservoir area. The first one was initiated over ten years ago to make way for the giant Three Gorges Dam Project, begun in 1993 and designed to generate electricity and contain floods on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The government relocated a total of 1.13 million people.

This time the number of relocated people would more than double that figure to 2.3 million. The relocation would help bring down the residential population in northeast Chongqing to 7 million.

Reduced population would make it possible to ecologically safeguard the dam area and create an important ecological barrier inside the Yangtze River basin.

During the first relocation, most migrants resettled by just moving to a higher altitude in the Yangtze River basin.

Population density in the reservoir area is 302 people per square kilometer. This is 2.1 times the national level and 4 to 5 times higher than figures in similar regions, thus far exceeding the proper level. Per capita land possession is less than 1 mu (666.667 square meters), leaving the contradiction between land and population another burden on the environment, according to an official from the research group's investigation on the second relocation.

Restored charm of the Three Gorges area, as a result of less population pressure, could attract millions of tourists there and create a much-needed cash cow for the poverty-stricken residents.

The relocation could also help to raise resource use efficiency, intensify land use and increase investment returns, said Chen Yue, a member of the relocation research group.

CPPCC member Zhang also echoed Chen in this regard. "Most people have gone to the city proper or coastal provinces to make a living, but they still hold on to their land ownership," he explained. "This has blocked intensive farming, making it difficult for agricultural production to improve."

Some experts have suggested using administrative means for the second relocation. Lan Yong, a history professor at Southwest University and an expert on the Three Gorges issue, is one of them. He said: "The government should issue a compulsory command for the relocation in order to ease population pressure around the dam area and to readjust the irrational economic structure there."

However, Chen and his research team pointed out several disadvantages with administrative means. "One is high cost; another is that the immigrants may not acclimate easily to city life and form new interpersonal relationships, so they may migrate back to the dam areas," Chen said. "And the biggest problem is that they may grow too dependent on the government about their life and employment."
After careful consideration, the standpoint of a government-guided, market-targeted and voluntary-based relocation was advocated.

To implement the relocation based on this principal, the municipality has framed a "one circle, two flanks" growth pattern. One circle refers to a city cluster that includes areas within "one-hour vehicle travel" distance into the city proper. The two flanks refer to northeast and southeast Chongqing.

The municipality intends to absorb the surplus labor force from the two flanks by developing the one circle.

The government has designated some industrial parks and enterprises inside the circle. Immigrants and migrant workers from the dam area will be given certain rewards and tax incentives if they work inside the city proper.

"This second relocation program will integrate the transfer of rural labor force into the urbanization and industrialization process," said Miu Wei, an official with Chongqing Development and Reform Commission.

According to Miu, the government is now planning the relocation of some outstanding migrant workers and some township residents into the city proper.

Xu Suhuan, vice director of the economic commission in Wanzhou District, an area designated for immigrant relocation, nodded his agreement. "Wanzhou's current residential population is 1.5 million; it will not be a problem for it to absorb another 300,000."

However, he still had some concerns for the elderly immigrants, and was urging the government to work something out for them.

Some experts suggested channeling the money earmarked for high-cost investment in the dam area into financing basic social security for the new migrants so that they could establish a stable, long term home.

Some areas in Chongqing are also piloting a land-for-social security program to steer farmers to surrender their land and seek a new life in the city.

Experts are studying other issues: public education, supply of low-rent and affordable housing, etc. These additional problems demand resolution if a successful relocation is to be achieved.

(China.org.cn by Yuan Fang, September 18, 2007)