

China to speed up ethnic regions development

Chinese authorities have pledged to accelerate development of ethnic regions during the 13th Five-Year Plan period (2016-2020), as the country aims to create a moderately prosperous society by 2020, according to a State Council statement.

The development of ethnic regions is important for ethnic unity, social harmony and stability, as well as the country's lasting peace and stability, according to the statement signed by Premier Li Keqiang.

The document details major targets ranging from continued rapid economic development to improved ecological environment and ethnic unity, to ensure the regions do not fall behind on the country's journey toward becoming a moderately prosperous society by 2020.

The central authorities aim to achieve annual gross regional product growth of over 8 percent in these regions, lifting 18.05 million people in rural areas out of poverty.

Other major tasks were also set, including improving livelihoods and the protection of ethnic minority villages and towns, asking authorities to support development of the regions via preferential policies.

Minorities account for 8.5 percent of China's population.

Enhanced inspection ordered following food poisoning incidents

China's food watchdog has ordered stepped up inspection on food safety in the rural areas after eight people have died from tainted food over the past two months.

In one incident on Dec. 18, 2016, 30 residents came down with food poisoning, two of whom later died, after the cook mistook sodium nitrite for salt during a funeral dinner in Miaoya Village, Bazhong city of Sichuan Province, according to a circular released by the China Food and Drug Administration.

The other two cases included one in a village in Mudanjiang City in northeast China's Heilongjiang Province and one in Huilong Village in Hubei Province in November and December last year. In both instances, methanol was mistakenly served during the banquets, leading to three deaths in each case.

The administration ordered enhanced inspection of the liquor market and strict penalties for illegalities such as selling fake or adulterated liquor.

Regular inspections and supervision of rural catering services should be strengthened and standardized guidance should be released for food safety and banquets in rural areas to prevent such incidents from happening again.

China encourages college grads to work in grassroots

The central government has issued a guideline to encourage more college graduates to work at the community level.

The guideline, which was jointly issued by the General Office of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, and the General Office of the State Council, has been designed to involve college graduates in economic and social development.

College graduates will be encouraged to find employment in the modern seed industry, agrotechny, countryside tourism, rural e-commerce, rural cooperatives and water conservation projects, according to the guideline.

The guideline says college graduates will be encouraged to work in the middle and western parts of the country, the northeast China and other less-developed and remote areas.

Graduates will also be encouraged to join the army with preferential policies.

The guideline says college graduates will be encouraged to work for small- and medium-sized enterprises, or start their own businesses.

To be attractive to graduates, companies must offer good training programs as well as higher wages and allowances, according to the guideline.

The guideline stipulates that civil servant recruitment in provincial-level agencies will only consider candidates with at least two years of grassroots working experience.

The government estimates that about 7.95 million college students will graduate this year, accounting for over a half of newly-added urban labor force.

China plans huge spending on farmland improvement

China plans huge spending to improve farmland quality in the next few years in hopes of propping up grain supplies as shrinking arable land has put the populous country under pressure to feed its people.

A total of 600 billion yuan (around 88 billion U.S. dollars) will be pumped into the field by 2020, Han Jun, deputy director of the central agricultural work leading team office, said on Tuesday at a press conference.

The central and local governments will provide the funds, Han said, adding that he hopes the efforts will also attract private investment.

It was the latest move in a nationwide official program to build "high-standard cropland," which, according to official documents, refers to large-scale, contiguous plots of land with fertile soil and modern farming facilities. This type of farmland can maintain stable and high yields and has sound ecological condition and strong capacity to resist natural disasters.

China improved around 26.87 million hectares of farmland to meet those standards from 2011 to 2015. The Ministry of Land and Resources estimates there will be a 10- to 20-percent rise in grain production capacity.

With the new investment plan, improvement of another 26.67 million hectares can be completed by 2020, Han said, adding the government will try to hit 40 million hectares.

China's arable land reserves have been falling in recent years, some occupied by construction of new homes and factories and some replanted with trees and grass for ecological protection. The phenomenon, along with the first drop in grain output in more than a decade last year, has added to concerns about food security.

The country still had a shortfall of about 20 million tonnes in the amount of grain it produced and consumed, according to official calculations.

China is eyeing the farmland-improvement program to help boost grain yields and modernize agriculture.

Efforts must be made to stabilize farmland area and improve its quality to ensure grain self-sufficiency and food security, according to a document released Monday by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council.

The document demanded more efforts to replenish, as much arable land is currently occupied by non-agricultural construction.

China aims to retain at least 124.33 million hectares of arable land in 2020, and the figure was 133.3 million hectares at the end of 2015. The government

has set a warning level of 120 million hectares and reiterated the level must not be breached.

The arable land should be protected “the way we protect pandas,” according to the document.

Central China province reports new H7N9 case

Another human H7N9 avian flu case has been reported in central China’s Hunan Province, bringing the total number of infections in the province to 16, including five fatalities, this year.

The female patient, 37, was diagnosed in Yueyang City Monday. She had contact with poultry before falling ill and is in critical condition, according to the Hunan provincial disease control and prevention center.

People who had close contact with the patient have not shown symptoms of fever or coughing.

In addition to Hunan, human H7N9 infections have also been reported in the provinces of Guangdong, Guizhou, Hubei, Henan, Jiangxi and Shandong, as well as in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Macao.

H7N9 is a bird flu strain first reported to have infected humans in March 2013 in China. It is most likely to strike in winter and spring.