HIDDEN ENVIRONMENTAL TROUBLES OF RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT IN CHINA’S WESTERN REGIONS

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In 2009, the Chinese government launched a series of policies to stimulate economic development, and the momentum for investments in large-scale development of the western regions increased. Hydropower development on rivers and mineral resource development vigorously moved forward. This trend, together with simplification of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) approval process and supervision, has led to further threats to the environment in western regions.

Xichang (西昌), a mid-sized city in southwest China, is known as the “Moon City” and “Aerospace City” of China. It is famous for its sunshine. However, a different picture of the city can be seen if one visits it now—chimneys belch smoke everywhere. In the last two years, a lead-zinc smelter with an annual productivity of 100 thousand tons was built in the Anning Valley (安宁河谷), only a little over ten kilometers away from the city. Nearby, the Panzhihua Iron and Steel’s Xichang Comprehensive Utilization of Vanadium and Titanium Project (攀钢西昌钒钛综合利用项目) was under construction next to the Huanglian Stone Forest in Huanglianguan Township (黄联), located on the lower part of the same valley. The project, with an total investment of 17 billion RMB, is estimated to produce 160 thousand tons of vanadium slag, 18.3 thousand tons of vanadium iron, 300 thousand tons of titanium ore concentrate, 160 thousand tons of high titanium slag, 100 thousand tons of titanium dioxide, 4 million tons of iron, 3.6 million tons of steel, and 3.5 million tons of hot rolled plates annually.¹

In Anning Valley, tens of mines, smelters, and concentration plants are being built—that is why a thick layer of polluted air hangs over the valley. Ironically, several years ago the government of Sichuan Province invested a large sum of money to develop the Panzhihua-Xichang area as a national tourist project named “Tour of Sunshine

¹ Data is from the official statistics of key projects in Liangshan Prefecture.
in Winter.” In the near future, a world-class hydraulic development cluster will be constructed in this area. This is only one example of the kinds of resource-intensive development being seen in China’s West.

In 2009, China was enthusiastic about investing in large-scale development of the western regions. Wenchuan (汶川) post-earthquake reconstruction, hydropower development on rivers, and mineral resource development were making fast progress. Such trends have led to even further threats to the natural environment in the western regions due to the following factors: construction of a series of large and controversial projects, simplification of the environmental impact assessment (EIA) approval processes, lack of precise scientific planning and feasibility assessment, and ineffective supervision.

I. Resource-oriented Industry Plans to Move to Western Regions

Due to the unique natural environment and resource advantages, a resource-oriented industry cluster is growing in China’s western regions. It covers the following:

1. Oil, natural gas, and other energy resource industry zones in and around the Tarim Basin (塔里木盆地) in Xinjiang. This includes the exploration and development of ferrous and non-ferrous metals on the northern side of the Kunlun Mountains (昆仑山), oil and gas in the Tarim River Basin, and coal in the middle section of the Tianshan Mountains (天山山脉).

2. The non-ferrous metals, coal, and salt chemical industrial zones in the Altai Region (阿尔泰) of southern Xinjiang Province. This includes the exploitation and development of non-ferrous metals in the eastern section of the Tianshan Mountains and Altai Mountains, and the development of coal and potash chemical processing in the Kumutake Desert in Hami Region (哈密库姆塔克沙漠).

3. The pre-salt oil, non-ferrous metals, and iron industrial zones in the Qaidam Basin (柴达木盆地). This includes oil, the iron industry in western Qaidam Basin, the ten-million-ton iron and steel smelting and potash chemical processing industry in the middle of the Basin, the mining of jade and gold in the middle section of Kunlun Mountains, and the mining of coal in the Datonghe River Valley (大通河流域).