

Shaanxi plans to move 2.7m to safer areas

Global Times, May 13, 2011

Twice as big as the Three Gorges Dam relocation project, China's largest-ever migration is under way in Shaanxi Province: 2.7 million people will leave their homes in mountainous areas over the next decade and head for a new life.

About 2.4 million will be moved from 28 mountainous counties and cities in the Qinba areas south of the province that are prone to a major flood every 3.5 years, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

A further 392,000 people in Baiyu areas in the north of the province will also be relocated. Baiyu's problem is drought, the agency reported: In extreme cases, villagers living in these areas have one shower a year.

"The goal of the project is to improve people's livelihood," Shaanxi Governor Zhao Zhengyong told Xinhua. "Those migrants will live in a safer and more convenient environment. The government will not force any one of them to move."

"The Qinba areas suffered serious damage in the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake and it's hit by floods and landslides almost every summer due to heavy rainfall," a disaster-relief office staff member under the Civil Affairs Bureau of Hanzhong, a city in the southwest corner of Shaanxi, told the *Global Times* on condition of anonymity.

"These mountainous areas are not suitable for living. So the relocation project will benefit people in these areas a lot."

A Baiyu villager told Xinhua he felt reluctant to move.

"I have lived here for more than 50 years," Gao Xueping reportedly said. "But if I stay, my children will be bound to poverty like me."

The rural migrants can choose to live in Shaanxi towns, cities or industrialized areas, Xinhua reported.

Farmers are encouraged to move to urban areas where new villages and towns will be built. Migrants will be trained with skills to earn a living and each village will have "one or two pillar products," the report said.

Citing local officials, it is estimated the entire project – including industrialization, urbanization and agricultural modernization – will take a decade to complete.

The total cost is estimated at 115.94 billion yuan (US\$17.84 billion), according to *People's Daily*. The provincial government has allocated 1 billion yuan for initiating the project.

According to a statement issued on the website of the provincial government on Thursday, officials from the cities and counties involved are set to meet at the end of this month to further implement the project. An improved project plan will be submitted to the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development.

Migrants may find it difficult adapting to the new environment, Feng Zhiming, a researcher at the Institute of Geographic Sciences and Natural Resources Research of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, told the *Global Times*.

"The local government needs to provide enough jobs for these migrants to help them settle down," he said. "Blending into a new environment is no easy thing even if the relocation project happens within one province."

Mining companies are reportedly funding the project.

One company overseeing the project was set up in April with a registered capital of 3 billion yuan from its two stockholders: the provincial finance bureau and Shaanxi Non-ferrous Metals Holding Group Co, the *Economic Observer* reported.

A total 6 billion yuan has been raised for this year's relocation from the Qinba areas, the Beijing-based paper reported, of which 1 billion yuan came from the provincial finance bureau, 2 billion from the mining company and the rest from a bank loan.

Shenhua Group, the nation's biggest coal producer, will help the provincial government raise 2.2 billion yuan for the Baiyu relocation this year, according to the *Economic Observer*.

"It's not difficult to imagine that these companies have some secret deal with the provincial government for their own interests in the region," Dong Miao, a resident of the city of Yulin in the north of the province, told the *Global Times*.

All efforts to contact both companies failed on Thursday.

Shaanxi is rich in coal, gold, iron and gas. The Qinba city of Hanzhong is the fifth-largest gold producer in China.

The two areas' total resources are worth more than 42 trillion yuan – one third of the national total – according to the provincial government website. The provincial government denied trading resources for funding.

"The participation of the enterprises helps relieve the residents of the burden of relocation and demonstrates their willingness to take social responsibility," an unnamed official was quoted as saying by the *Economic Observer*.