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Beijing comes clean on toxic air

Authorities in Beijing have bowed to public demands to reveal the amount of dangerous fine particles in the city's choking air

Michael Sheridan, Hong Kong Published: 5 February 2012

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Heavy pollution surrounds the China Central Television headquarters in Beijing (Ed Jones)

remarkable victory for people power, the authorities in Beijing have been forced to bow to public demands that they reveal the level of pollution in the city's choking air.

It followed a battle between the censors and the American Embassy's Twitter account, which measured the level of dangerous fine particles in the atmosphere, and was reposted by dozens of Chinese websites even though Twitter is banned in the country.

The government gave in after a particularly toxic bout of winter smog which was so foul that Beijing International Airport had to suspend flights because pilots could not see other aircraft.

For one British family such intolerable pollution made it time to fly out of Beijing for good. Like

many other foreign residents, Matt Elmes, 40, and Hannah Routh, 38, feared for their children, Dylan, two, and one-year-old Nancy.

“On the worst days we wouldn’t take the kids out of the house,” said Elmes. The couple moved to Hong Kong three weeks ago after four years in Beijing.

Last month the Environment Ministry hastily tightened air quality standards for cities across China. “This was in response to the public outcry,” said Christine Loh of Policy Exchange, a Hong Kong think-tank. “Environmental degradation in China is so serious that nobody thinks you can do nothing any more.”

Pollution in China claims up to 700,000 lives a year. The filthy air is caused by smokestack industries, millions of vehicles, hundreds of thousands of construction sites and, in Beijing’s case, swirling dust from the Gobi desert that can be trapped over the city for days.

Pan Shiyi, a property developer who symbolises the yuppie aspirations of many young Beijingers, started complaining on his blog, which has 7m followers. Then an editor named Yu Ping, who has a seven-year-old son, began an open campaign to get officials to disclose the data, counting on the fact that China’s elite has to breathe Beijing’s air - at least when they step outside their air-conditioned offices.

By carefully avoiding politics the two were relatively untouchable. Even the state-controlled China Daily newspaper has disclosed that lung cancer rates in the capital have soared by 60% over the last decade.

However, politics is never far beneath the surface in China. The regime took credit for cleaning up the Beijing air for the 2008 Olympics and the city issues air quality figures daily. The problem was that few people believed them.

So when the American Embassy began publishing its own figures, monitored from the roof of its compound to the east of the city, there was immediate conflict. The Chinese maintained that Beijing had good air 80% of the time, the Americans said it had bad air 80% of the time.

Nor did Beijing issue measurements for the most dangerous particles, known as PM25. The Americans did and the results were shocking. These microscopic particles are easily ingested and pose a special threat to growing children.

On one occasion the US Embassy’s Twitter feed called the air “crazy bad”. According to a US diplomatic cable leaked to Wikileaks, Wang Shu’ai, a foreign ministry official, told the embassy to stop publishing the data because it could lead to “social consequences”.

The Chinese media has attacked the US ambassador, Gary Locke, and his predecessor, former Republican presidential candidate Jon Huntsman, for “interfering” in local affairs.

The authorities were finally forced to give in. For the past fortnight they have issued their own figures for PM25 particles in Beijing. They show better quality air than the data from the US Embassy. But an important principle has been conceded.

But those fleeing to Hong Kong will find that Loh and other campaigners have been allowed to fight a public battle against air pollution, but to little effect. James Middleton, 62, a British businessman who heads CleartheAir, a campaign group, said some executives are relocating to Singapore or declining to take up postings in the city. “It’s killing people,” he said.

Hong Kong is not due to have a fully elected government until 2017 and until then its leaders, who are appointed by China, can shrug off public opinion. But Middleton says that, too, is changing. “There is an upsurge of complaint,” he said.