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China takes "urgent" energy challenge to masses

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Source: Reuters

BEIJING, Sept 1 (Reuters) - China's leaders have called on ordinary people to help tackle the "urgent" problem of booming energy demand and massive pollution, which they warn threatens growth, launching a huge propaganda campaign on Saturday.

"For the long-term development of our Chinese nation, saving energy and reducing pollution are so important, so urgent," Ma Kai, head of the powerful ministry that controls energy policy, said at the televised launch of the country's first large-scale appeal to consumers to change their lifestyle.

"If we don't change this situation...the economy will go badly and won't go far," he added, between videos highlighting China's environmental and energy woes.

With pollution already causing unrest in some parts of the country, previous efficiency drives have largely focused on large companies and power-guzzling industries.

Much of the new plan has an old-fashioned didactic flavour, including a TV show called "Who is the energy saving champion", and the slogan "conservation is glorious, waste is shameful".

At least one official booklet of energy saving tips has an austerity reminiscent of earlier communist eras. It recommends washing clothes by hand once a month, and cutting back on new outfits and even alcohol consumption.

"Drink 500 grams less of (Chinese spirit) baijiu and save the equivalent of 400 grams of coal," it admonished drinkers in a country that produces over 2 billion tonnes of the fuel a year.

But other aspects -- promoting energy saving light-bulbs and asking people to turn down air-conditioners -- would sound familiar to environmentalists anywhere around the world.

Whether Beijing can convince a society so recently hooked on consumerism to return to more frugal ways is questionable, but the new tactic appeared to signal top officials' mounting concern about an issue that makes them vulnerable at home and abroad.

Already dependent on foreign suppliers for nearly half its oil, China is also under international pressure about carbon dioxide emissions which are expected to overtake U.S. levels to become the world's number one this year.

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There is one tool that economists inside China and abroad agree should help curb demand from all kinds of users -- freeing up state controlled energy prices.

An extra tariff for power producers with equipment to strip sulphur dioxide from their emissions appears to have helped trim growth in the acid rain causing pollutant even as power production boomed.

But despite pledges to free up markets, the country's leaders have made little progress, hindered by high oil prices and concerns more expensive energy could spark protests or fuel inflation, which in July hit a 10-year peak of 5.6 percent.

Ma reiterated commitment to a slow change. "We are resolute in our commitment to reforming prices, particularly of natural resources, but it is a gradual process," he told journalists on the sidelines of the campaign launch.



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