
China punishes thousands of people for illegal land grabs

BEIJING, April 14 (Xinhua) -- China has meted out disciplinary punishments to 2,864 people and criminal penalties to 535 during the largest-scale crackdown on illegal land grabs in recent years.

Chinese authorities uncovered 31,700 cases of unlawful land seizure from Sept. 15 last year to Jan. 15, involving a total land area of 3.364 million mu (about 224,267 hectares), said Zhang Pu, deputy director of the law enforcement and supervision bureau of the Ministry of Land and Resources, on Monday.

Nearly 60 percent of the land was used before obtaining government approval. The rest was illegally rented or misappropriated, Zhang said at a press conference.

Altogether 3,857 people were transferred to disciplinary investigators and 2,797 to judiciaries, said Zhang.

The area of unlawful buildings confiscated and demolished in the campaign totaled 26.3 million square kilometers, while 4 billion yuan (about 571 million U.S. dollars) was fined and seized.

The campaign targeted at local governments who illegally transferred land from rightful owners to property developers or industrial parks. It has triggered rising resent from farmers and concerns on grain supply.

The campaign had "effectively checked the worsening tendency of unlawful land use," said Liu Tianzeng, chief land inspector sent by the Ministry to eastern city of Nanjing.

China found 43,000 hectares of land illegally grabbed last year, 67.6 percent up from 2006, official data show.

Liu said the country must establish a long-term mechanism to prevent illegal land use and keep arable land of no less than 120 million hectares. That is the amount China needs to feed its 1.3 billion people.

A national regulation was being revised to hold local leadership responsible for serious law-breaching land grabs that occurred within their jurisdiction, said Zhang. He urged strict restrictions be imposed on registry and bank loans to projects involving land misuse.

China had 121 million hectares of arable land at the end of 2006, down 8.3 million hectares from 1996.