CHINA WATCH XII

Norway's Arctic town envisions gateway on Polar Silk Road with link to China

KIRKENES, Norway, March 9 (Xinhua) -- Envisioning a new port on the Barents Sea coast and a railway that goes all the way southward to the Baltic Sea, Norway's Arctic town of Kirkenes sets its sight on a major European hub on a Polar Silk Road with link to China. Finland and Norway announced on Friday plans to explore building an Arctic railway between Finland's northern city of Rovaniemi and Norway's ice-free port of Kirkenes. This agreement came after Norway plans to develop new harbor and terminal areas near Kirkenes, a town in the Sor-Varanger municipality in Norway's northeastern county of Finnmark.

A Major Activity Hub

"This project with railway connected to the Belt and Road Initiative through the Northern Sea Route and the Arctic strategy of China fits very well into all the plan for the huge 'Barents Harbor'," Rune Rafaelsen, mayor of the Sor-Varanger municipality, told Xinhua. "Regarding logistic transport in the Arctic in the future, you are dependent on having a good railroad that could reach Europe fast and Kirkenes is the first (Western) port when you come from China," he said.

According to a study by the Finnish and Norwegian governments, the 520-km railway between Rovaniemi and Kirkenes would cost about 2.9 billion euros (3.6 billion U.S. dollars) and open in 2030. It will form part of the proposed Arctic Corridor, which envisions cargo from Asia would be offloaded in Kirkenes and sent southward by railway to Finland, the Baltic states and the rest of Europe. Local planners in Kirkenes have been lobbying the Norwegian town of Barents, 15 km west of the border with Russia, as the perfect site for a major hub linking the Arctic shipping route and the Arctic Corridor. "The vision for The Arctic Railway is to be able to offer an environment-friendly and faster transport alternative for goods between Northeast Asia and Northern Europe via Finland by utilization of the Northern Sea Route and development of Kirkenes as a hub port," said a Norwegian report published in January.

The report titled An Arctic Railway Vision was a result of work between the development company Sor-Varanger Utvikling, the Kirkenes Business Park and the Finnmark County Council. The voyage could be cut back 40 percent via the Northern Sea Route, the Arctic shipping course also known as the Northeast Passage, compared to the current route through the Suez Canal between Northern Europe and Northeast Asia, according to the report. It would result in a 20 percent reduction in fuel consumption, it added.

Polar Silk Road to China

The report, which said the Arctic railway is potentially a new "maritime silk route in the north," was released just a few days before China published a white paper elaborating on its vision of a Polar Silk Road, an extension of the Belt and Road Initiative it proposed in 2013.The Initiative's overland Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road are expected to promote the connectivity of policy, infrastructure, trade, investment and people in areas involved to seek common development and prosperity.The Initiative brings opportunities for parties concerned to jointly build a Polar Silk Road, and facilitate connectivity and sustainable economic and social development in the Arctic region, the white paper noted.

People in Kirkenes believe that China's interest in the development of the Arctic and its economic prospect are "very important" factors for the town's dream to come true. "To realize these plans, we need lots of investment, and we also need cargo. So, without a good connection and a good cooperation with China, this project will never be done," Rafaelsen said. "Cooperation between Norway and China is extremely important for transport and logistics in the Arctic," he said, citing the fact that seven of the world's top 10 container ports are now in China.

Kenneth Stalsett, CEO of the Sor-Varanger Utvikling company, said Sor-Varanger, a municipality of about 10,000 with 6,000 of them in the Kirkenes area, cannot itself suffice for a railroad. "We are...basically nothing in the big picture," Stalsett said. "So we need to connect the world globally if this is going to happen." He noted that the Arctic railway is dependent on an international interest in using the Arctic shipping route. "The Chinese are sending ships. They are developing ships and talking about the Northern Sea Route in a positive way and the Arctic in a positive setting," Stalsett said. "So I think without this the railroad will just be a dream in the future, but with it, it's absolutely doable and important," he said.

China winning war against pollution: U.S. study

CHICAGO, March 13 (Xinhua) -- Chinese cities combating smog have significantly cut serious air pollution in the past four years, a study by a University of Chicago team has found. "The data is in - China is winning its war against pollution," said Michael Greenstone, a professor in economics and director of the Energy Policy Institute at the University of Chicago. According to the analysis conducted by Greenstone's team, based on data from more than 200 government monitors throughout China, air pollution has decreased across the board in China's most populated areas.

Chinese cities on average have cut concentrations of fine particulates PM2.5, widely considered the deadliest form of air pollution, by 32 percent in just four years, said the paper made public on Monday. "By winning this war, China is due to see dramatic improvements in the overall health

of its people, including longer lifespans, if these improvements are sustained," Greenstone added. The study found that the most populated cities saw some of the greatest declines: Beijing cut air pollution by 35 percent; Shijiazhuang, the Hebei Province's capital city, cut pollution by 39 percent; and Baoding, China's most polluted city as of 2015, cut pollution by 38 percent.

If China sustains these reductions, Greenstone said he believes that Chinese residents in the polluted areas can see their lifespans extended by 2.4 years on average. The study contributed the remarkable progress to China's "aggressive, and in some cases extraordinary, measures" to reduce its pollution in a relatively short time span.

Chinese scientists identify gut bacteria beneficial to type 2 diabetes patients

WASHINGTON, March 8 (Xinhua) -- Chinese scientists have identified a guild of particular gut bacteria that can ferment dietary fibers to help control blood glucose of patients with type 2 diabetes. The study, published on Thursday in the journal Science, showed that a diversified high fiber diet can promote 15 strains of gut bacteria that produce short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs), which nourish gut epithelial cells, reduce inflammation, and play a role in appetite control. Many gut bacteria have the genes and the capacity to produce SCFAs from carbohydrate fermentation. Deficiency of SCFAs are known to be associated with type 2 diabetes.

Zhao Liping and colleagues at Shanghai Jiao Tong University randomized patients to treatment or control group, both having similar intake of energy and macronutrients, using acrabose as the medication for blood glucose control but the treatment group had extra amount of diverse fibers.

Throughout the 12-week treatment, the intervention group, given a large, diversified amount of dietary fibers from whole grains, traditional Chinese medicinal foods and prebiotics, experienced more significant and faster improvement in blood glucose control, greater weight loss, and better lipid profile compared to the controls. After taking the treatment diet for four weeks, patients had a new gut microbiota and kept the new gut microbiota for another 8 weeks. This group of bacteria reached greater abundance and diversity, and the patients had lower acetylated hemoglobin levels which indicated better blood glucose regulation.

The study also showed that these beneficial effects of the high fiber diet were directly contributed by changes in the gut microbiota by transplanting baseline and end of trial gut microbiota from the same individual to germfree mice.

"It provides compelling evidence supporting increased intake of dietary fibers may benefit T2D patients," Zhao told Xinhua Thursday. Then researchers identified a small group of bacterial strains that were likely to be the key drivers of patients' clinical improvements: these bacteria out-competed others and became dominant members of the gut microbial community.

"We may target restoration of this guild of beneficial bacteria for better glycemic control in patients with type 2 diabetes. If you have lost most or all the members of the guild of these active SCFA producers, you may need a microbiota transplantation from a healthy donor whose microbiota profile best benefit you by providing those members missing in your gut," Zhao said. The study showed that a dietary program that targets this beneficial guild of gut bacteria is a clinically effective "gut-specific" way to improve insulin secretion and therefore alleviates type 2 diabetes.

China's digital publication industry grows in 2017: report

BEIJING, March 13 (Xinhua) -- The value of China's digital publication industry reached 4.15 billion yuan (657 million U.S. dollars) in 2017, a year-on-year increase of 21.3 percent, a report showed.

The industry, which includes e-books, digital newspapers and magazines and mobile book applications, is expected to reach a market value of more than 7 billion yuan in 2020, according to the report released by data provider iResearch. The fast development is powered by government support, progress in hardware and software, mobile payment and enthusiasm for online reading, according to the report. But the industry also faces a spate of problems, such as insufficient employees, piracy and dissatisfaction about the reading experience, the report said.

A touch of future with cutting-edge Chinese technologies at Mobile World Congress

BARCELONA, Feb. 27 (Xinhua) -- Just by putting on a black helmet, a backpack and a pair of gloves, Hose Aquinas made his personal history of setting his own feet on the "moon".

"My dream has come true, and it's so real!" said the astounded Spanish businessman who was among the scores of visitors lining up at the Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei's Wireless X Labs at the annual Mobile World Congress (MWC) in Barcelona, Spain.

Drawn by the latest 5G Computer Graphics (CG) Cloud technologies developed by Huawei and its partners, visitors seem more than eager to experience the real-time virtual reality of landing on the moon in a lunar module, opening the door, walking on the moon surface and picking up sample rocks. As one of the pioneers in the industry, Huawei relocates the process of image rendering to cloud with its CG cloud VR demo, allowing VR experience to be free of cables used in many other VR games.

"I never thought my life can be changed just like that," Aquina told Xinhua, "5G and cloud technologies offers so many new possibilities." The moon landing VR experience is just a taste

of what future looks like with G5 and cloud technologies. Unlike the time of 2G and 3G, the era of 5G is increasingly shaped with substantial contributions from the Chinese firms which are moving to lead the telecommunication industry. At the MWC, Chinese companies, including Huawei, ZTE and Alibaba, presented the latest technologies and solutions for 5G, All-Cloud network, video and Internet of Things (IoT). Huawei alone will launch more than 20 cutting-edge products during the four-day event, including an Intent-driven Network and the AUTIN digital O&M platform, showcasing the results with its over 300 partners in a bid to embark on the roads to a fully-connected intelligent world.

"5G standards and technologies are maturing. As market demand continues to grow, Huawei plans to launch a full range of end-to-end 5G products, including customer premise equipment, to help carriers get a head start on 5G," said Ken Hu, Huawei Rotating CEO."The ultimate goal is to build a fully connected, intelligent world," Hu said.

"Life could be so much different with these technologies," said British visitor Kerry Robinson.

Another industry leader, Alibaba Cloud, the largest cloud partner in China, also launched an array of cloud and AI products and solutions at the MWC, ranging from big data and artificial intelligence to infrastructure, security and private cloud solutions.

"Alibaba Cloud wants to be an enabler for technology innovation in Europe helping enterprises do business. The Mobile World Congress in Barcelona is a great opportunity for us to refresh our European strategy and consider how we can make an increasing contribution to the digital transformation of enterprises in this market," said Yeming Wang, General Manager of Alibaba Cloud Europe. Some of these products, which already enjoyed success in China, demonstrate Alibaba Cloud´s advanced big data and AI capabilities enabled by super computing power. For instance, Image Search is widely applied in a number of scenarios in China including New Retail and the intelligent service robot served more than 40 million customers in a single day during last year's 11.11 Global Shopping Festival. Apparently, the prospect of 5G offers even more opportunities, and of course challenges for Chinese firms.

"5G will allow us to enjoy unprecedented freedom of wireless, mobile and connected life beyond imagination," said Wang Yufeng, President of Huawei's Wireless X Labs. "It is a road untaken with unforeseen challenges, so we have to work very hard to keep being ahead in the competition," said Wang.

Readers comments and feedback are welcome by Pathfinder Foundation.

(The Pathfinder Foundation and the Xinhua News agency signed an Agreement to jointly publish 'China Watch' a special Compilation of news from China tailor-made for a Sri Lankan readership/audience. Can view on www.pathfinderfoundation.org)