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China not to sacrifice food for fuel: energy experts

(Xinhua)

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MANILA -- China has no plan to sacrifice food for fuel, the country's energy experts said on Thursday amid controversy over biofuel.

"Food security comes first in China, more important than fuel," said Song Yanqin, a co-drafter of China's national energy strategies, at Asia Clean Energy Forum 2008 sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in Manila.

"Biofuel," as said in the ADB's publication "Development Asia", has become a new buzz word all over the world, from the Philippines to Brazil, from the United States to the European Union.

Produced from agricultural crops such as maize, palm oil, sugarcane and jatropa, biofuel are used to run factories, power stations and vehicles. Countries that have the right conditions are setting aside millions of hectares of land for new plantations as international demand for prominent biofuel.

However, there is another side of the coin. The development of biofuel is considered as one reason for the global shortage of grain which drives food prices high in many countries. In the Philippines' southern region of Mindanao, for instance, rice prices have gone up to 50 pesos (\$1.14) per kilogram.

"Biofuel is sensitive," said Song, especially in China, where 1.3 billion people live on only 120 million hectares of arable land.

"Actually, in the global context, biofuel is still a controversial topic calling for serious study," said Zhou Dadi, an advisor to China's National Energy Leading Group.

At the same forum, Dan Millison, a US designer of higher-tech alcohol plants, said "food versus fuel is 99-percent noise."

"Do your homework and get a noise filter. Time magazine is not your key reference document," he addressed the audience via a video-conferencing system.

"This problem is complicated," said Eric Usher, an official of United Nations Environment Program, adding that the dispute over biofuel will not be solved in a short time.

At the forum, with the theme of "Investing in Solutions that address Climate Change and Energy Security," Zhou Dadi explicated the sustainable energy strategy of China, giving priority to "conservation."

"Conservation comes first in the sustainable energy strategy of China," said the adviser, adding that specific and detailed regulations for energy conservation have been made in the country.

China has also set a target of 20 percent-intensity decrease for the 2006-2010 national development plan. That is, the country has

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to realize 4.4-percent energy-efficiency improvement annually in the five years, Zhou said.

Compared with the global annual figure of 1.2 percent over the past 30 years, the target for China is really impressive and encouraging, the adviser added.

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