

Letter From China: China can teach Africa about population zeal

Howard W. French Friday, March 23, 2007

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SHANGHAI: Terrified by the prospect of a world where one third or more of its people are elderly, Chinese intellectuals have issued the first murmurings of a broad reappraisal of one of the most sweeping government measures of modern times, this country's "one-child policy."

Placing such a momentous policy on the agenda has not been easy, and one can readily understand why. Already twice in its brief history in power, the Chinese Communist Party has invested its prestige and authority in truly epochal shifts in population policy, with one move representing nothing less than an abrupt about-face from the other.

A proper dictatorship of the proletariat would like to preserve as much of an air of infallibility as possible, but that has become increasingly difficult with China and population matters.

Obsessed with national strength, Mao Zedong equated population with power, and in the 1950s, in a move heavy with consequences for all of humanity, called for Chinese people to go forth and multiply. "We should break down the superstition that it's disastrous to have many people or disastrous to have less land," Mao said, speaking at a conference in Chengdu in 1958.

Moments later, as if for emphasis, he added, "At present, we still lack people."

By a good distance, China was already the world's most populous nation. In the space of a mere two decades, however, the enthusiastic response to the chairman's call saw the country's population increase by more than 50 percent, reaching 998 million in 1980. That was the year that the one-child policy took effect.

With pressures on the land, resources and housing spiraling out of control and Mao gone, the government scrambled to put the brakes on, applying a near-blanket birth control policy, the likes of which mankind had never seen.

The one-child policy can be said to have worked, indeed worked very well. Paradoxically, it can also be said to have been something of a failure, perhaps even a monumental failure. This is for having produced unforeseen or at least unavowed side effects that China will struggle with for decades to come and that could conceivably extinguish the economic miracle that we have grown accustomed to witnessing.

In the latest twist, however, there are signs of hope for both China and for the world. In the margins of the recently completed Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, or congress, 29 Chinese political advisers spoke out against the one-

child policy, calling for it to be abolished because of the looming age trap that it has set for the country.

Whatever the outcome, this represents progress compared with a time when Mao alone was able to launch huge movements at great cost to the Chinese people and to humanity, or even to the about-face of the one-child policy, which was carried out without public debate.

The point is that with matters so consequential, no nation can afford to forgo a real conversation. Governments, of course, are not infallible, and when mistakes are made over population, whether because of ego or ignorance, their effects tend to linger disastrously, spawning conflict, famine and, perhaps worst of all for a world that suddenly seems to have awakened to the issue, environmental devastation.

Indeed, this is China's lesson to the world at a time when the fuse is fast burning down on a new population bomb arguably even more frightening than the Chinese one of the 1960s.

Consider Africa, for example. With the same alacrity that is driving its own development, China is building huge bridges to Africa, epicenter of the coming explosion.

The Chinese arrive with money to invest and with a gigantic appetite for Africa's natural resources. What they don't arrive with much of is advice, or even overt expressions of concern, for the continent's many problems, with arguably none more pressing than its galloping demographics.

In the name of a policy of "noninterference," China is locked in a see-no-evil approach to Africa, and this has the makings of a huge loss of opportunity for all concerned.

If demography is destiny, for Africa the numbers tell a haunting story. Between 1960 and 2020, the continent's population will have increased more than sixfold, roughly matching China's population today.

It is when one considers individual countries, however, that one's head begins to spin.

According to United Nations projections, Nigeria, which has not conducted a proper census in more than a generation, will add more than 50 million people between 2005 and 2020. By 2050, Africa's most populous country, a nation that is half again the size of Texas, will have 288 million people, or about the same number as the United States.

Ethiopia, scene of recurrent murderous famines in the past century, will double by 2040, reaching 160 million people. Somalia, a nation without a state, where the United States fights a shadow war with radical Islam, will nearly triple between 2005 and

2050, when it is projected to reach 21 million people. This, in a country without industry or infrastructure or, to be frank, much prospect.

In Rwanda, scene of the 20th century's last genocide, population pressures are widely believed to have fueled the bloodletting.

Tiny Rwanda is already one of the world's most densely inhabited countries, but it is about to get drastically, explosively worse, with the population set to double to roughly 18 million by 2035.

Uganda, next door, will have doubled even faster, by 2025, and by mid-century will have more than tripled from today, with a population of 92 million.

That country's president, Yoweri Museveni, a longtime American friend, has been quoted in a Mao-like vein, praising the increasing population as more of an opportunity for his country than a handicap.

China, it would seem, might have something useful to say to him on the topic. "We're all in this together" might be a good place to start.