

EDITORIAL

Taiwan mustn't become old beyond its years

As the Republic of China celebrates its 99th anniversary today, it seems appropriate to point out that its citizens are growing old too. People are living for longer, but the development coincides with a rapid drop in the number of births. Unless it is addressed, the trend is storing up trouble for future generations. When one generation passes retirement age, labor shortages resulting from the smaller replacement generation will impact tax revenues, leaving a vast shortfall when it comes to paying for pensions or care for the elderly.

Taiwan has one of the lowest birthrates in the world. In 2009, statistics released by the Ministry of the Interior showed that the average number of babies born to each woman fell to 1.0. The figure fell from 1.55 in 1999, and stood at less than half of the generally accepted ideal rate of 2.1 needed to maintain a stable population.

Desperate to address the problem, the government has tried a range of tactics, including financial rewards for families with newborn babies, funding for babysitters, and a bizarre initiative that offers a NT\$1 million cash prize for a slogan that will be used in publicity campaigns to encourage births. The latest move to be considered is a plan to subsidize in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment for couples that are trying, without success, to have children. The initiative would be costly, but is this a problem that money alone can solve?

The program would cost an estimated NT\$500 million a year and the Department of Health believes it could result in an extra 2,000 annual births. While the idea is a noble one, which would offer hope to despairing couples with no other option, that amounts to NT\$250,000 per child. It is a lot of money, and if successful, would only nudge the birthrate up by a couple of points.

As people become better educated, and used to a certain standard of living made possible by economic development, those in their 20s and 30s are increasingly tending to value careers and financial success above marriage and family. Taiwan is not alone in experiencing a falling birthrate. Alongside the island at the bottom of the global fertility table are Asian neighbors Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau.

Earlier this year, a parliamentary think tank in Seoul was charged with exploring ways to increase the number of South Korean babies born each year. Its verdict was that government-run programs set up to encourage nationals to procreate were on the whole unsuccessful, and that immigration reform was the only viable option. The final paper concluded: "Maternity leave, subsidies and other monetary compensations have proven to be ineffective in stopping falling birthrates in 40 European nations. Several empirical studies suggest that immigration is the option to take."

A glance at fertility statistics for EU members bears those findings out. In 2006, an average of 1.75 babies was born to each woman in Sweden. Despite generous social benefits — including 18 months of leave for both parents, paid for by the government, and heavily subsidized day care — the rate is expected to fall to 1.67 this year. Poland began offering payments to women for each new child in 2006, when the rate stood at 1.78. It is expected to drop to 1.28 in 2010. Italy also offered cash to families having a second child, but the level has fallen from 1.33 babies per woman in 2006 to an estimated 1.31 this year.

Meanwhile, developing nations have an abundance of something the developed world lacks — namely births. Africa tops the fertility table based on estimates for this year, with Niger at 7.75 births per woman, Uganda 6.77 and Mali 6.62 — rates that cannot be sustained by countries that are already struggling to support their populations. Closer to home, Laos' rate is expected to hit 4.41, the Philippines 3.27 and Cambodia 3.04.

It does not take a huge leap in logic to suggest that problems arising from the developing world's rocketing birthrate and the developed world's falling one can be addressed if migration is increased from one to the other. By encouraging skilled foreign workers to settle in Taiwan, the government could fill specific gaps in the domestic workforce while giving the population a much needed boost.

As we celebrate the 99th national day of the R.O.C., we should take a moment to think about what Taiwan might be like on the 150th. Will we have the vibrant, successful economy we enjoy today, or will the island be decrepit, past its best and unable to help itself? Long-term problems need far-sighted solutions. While the initiatives introduced so far to boost the birthrate are well intended, they also seem misguided. The government needs to rethink its policies to stop the nation from becoming old before its time.

Foreign workers are human beings, too



DANIEL J. BAUER

I hope, have a lasting effect on labor practices here and perhaps other Asian countries as well.

Several important issues in this story clearly call for sober attention.

Some local pundits have focused on the question of safety in a culture that seems all too casual about rules and regulations, inspections and licensing procedures and so on for potentially dangerous work projects. Was someone sleeping at the wheel when confirmation of safety measures and essential "double checks" were supposed to be going on? The public has a right to know how it came to be that those

The collapse of scaffolding from Freeway No. 6's Beishan Interchange in Nantou County and subsequent death of seven workers on Sept. 30 should,

scaffoldings came crashing down, and why workers were in positions of danger at the time.

It is yesterday's news that six of the seven fatalities in the accident were Indonesian workers and that authorities determined each of them was an "illegal" or, put more gently, undocumented laborer.

How serious is this business of undocumented laborers in Taiwan? We'd have to be wearing blinders to say it's not a serious problem. Now the media is reporting that thousands of foreign workers apparently rather easily slip through the net and may without much hassle wind up in work venues such as the one that claimed these lives. Yin Jeon-chien and Chien Lin Whei-jun of the Control Yuan announced this week (in a study conducted long before the Freeway No. 6 tragedy) that as of August, there were 374,126 foreign workers in Taiwan, and 32,927 of them were missing. Does that sound like smoke and mirrors to you too?

These people have just upped and vanished? Yin and Chien say neither the Council of Labor Affairs nor the Bureau of Immigration even knows the gender of these missing workers, let alone how long they have been in Taiwan, or the names of their original employers. That gap in administrative competence strikes me as large as a crater.

What are the causes of this runaway foreign worker phenomenon? I have talked with caregivers from the Philippines who can identify with run-away workers they know. According to these friends, there is a ton of anecdotal evidence available on worker abuse that illustrates some of the story. I have written in the past of how some — not all, of course — "employers" treat their "employees." I use quote marks because all too often it sounds more like slave-drivers and, well, you know the other word. An "employer" hints at a sense of humanity.

Abuse of workers with which

anyone with ties to foreign laborers are all too familiar includes confiscation of passports and cell phones; refusal to allow time off from work duties; insistence on virtual "house arrest"; assignment of tasks that lie outside the contract such as "loaning" workers to members of the extended family for various extra services. Finally, some workers live under the threat of physical or sexual abuse. Taiwan's leaders speak too rarely and too softly about these shameful conditions.

I am not saying there are no bad apples in the large, hard-to-carry basket of our foreign worker community. Surely some of our workers are less than angelic. People are, after all, human. The only saints most of us are likely to know are on the New Orleans football team.

Foreign workers also may abscond because they are fed up with the antics of unscrupulous labor brokers (who may share their nationality.)

One little matter that throws light on attitudes about these workers is the question of compensation for the families of the six Indonesians who were killed. It ought to shock people of conscience to realize there initially appeared to be some hesitation about compensating the survivors of the Indonesians in the same way our society would compensate the employee who was Taiwanese. For a few brief horrible minutes, it seemed as if the lives of the Indonesians were less precious than those of the Taiwanese.

Perhaps this hard story will open more of our minds so that across the board, all of us in Taiwan will more readily view our foreign laborers not simply as employees and workers, but as human beings with families and needs like our own.

Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.

US push for Nobel laureate release, rising trade friction strain China ties

By FOSTER KLUG
WASHINGTON, AP

U.S. President Barack Obama's push for China to release an imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate and rising economic and trade friction could aggravate U.S. efforts to win crucial Chinese cooperation on global hot spots.

Ever-delicate U.S.-China relations had seemed to be warming, with the countries agreeing recently to end an eight-month freeze on military exchanges. But Obama's praise Friday for Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo's Nobel award will likely further rattle China at a time when the United States is stepping up pressure on Beijing over a currency policy Washington blames for job losses in the United States.

This recent swing from calls for cooperation to criticism is typical of a complicated relationship that both countries call important for world stability. U.S. officials are trying, with varying success, to press China on economic and human rights matters without jeopardizing Chinese support on Iranian and North Korean nuclear standoffs, climate change and other difficult issues.

The Obama administration says the relationship is mature enough to weather disagreements and to engage in blunt discussions. But Beijing, wary of appearing weak at a time of rising nationalism and deep social turmoil, often bristles at what it sees as U.S. interference.

In a statement released hours after Liu was awarded the Nobel, Obama praised the dissident as an "eloquent and courageous"

supporter of human rights and democracy "who has sacrificed his freedom for his beliefs."

He praised China for "lifting hundreds of millions out of poverty." But, he added, "this award reminds us that political reform has not kept pace, and that the basic human rights of every man, woman and child must be respected."

Obama called "on the Chinese government to release Mr. Liu as soon as possible." Liu was sentenced last year to 11 years in prison on subversion charges after he co-authored a document calling for greater freedom, among other activism.

Asked about Obama's comments, Wang Baodong, spokesman for the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said Chinese officials "oppose any other countries' meddling in China's internal affairs with any excuses." He said Chinese people "fully enjoy basic human rights."

Beijing earlier warned that the decision to award Liu the Nobel prize would harm relations with Norway, which is the home of the independent Norwegian Nobel Committee, which awards the peace prize.

The United States and China, which have the world's No. 1 and 2 economies, clash on a host of issues. Beijing has reacted with anger and unease to recent U.S. willingness to stick up for friends and allies in territorial disputes with China in the South and East China Seas; and to joint U.S.-South Korean military drills in the Yellow Sea, part of which lies within Chinese sovereign waters.

Taiwan and Tibet also are regu-

lar sources of tension. China suspended military contact with the United States in January to protest a US\$6.4 billion U.S. arms package for Taiwan, the self-governing island that China claims as its own territory. Obama also angered Beijing by meeting this year with the Dalai Lama, the exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader whom China calls a separatist.

Bonnie Glaser, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank, said that, "from the Chinese point of view, this looks like a coordinated and proactive U.S. effort to put pressure on China."

She said "it is particularly sensitive for the Chinese leadership when the president of the United States says something that is implicitly critical of" China.

Both sides, she said, probably will try to tamp down disagreement ahead of Chinese President Hu Jintao's planned trip to the United States next year.

Obama's praise for Liu comes amid harsh criticism of China's currency policies by U.S. lawmakers faced with make-or-break congressional elections next month. Many lawmakers contend that the Chinese yuan is undervalued by as much as 40 percent, which they say gives Chinese companies a significant competitive advantage over American businesses.

The Obama administration also is joining in. Ahead of this week's global finance meetings in Washington, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner ratcheted up pressure on China to make more progress in moving toward flexible exchange rates.

Kaohsiung flooding issue undermines DPP's image

By WILLIAM FANG
Special to The China Post

In a local TV interview on Oct. 1, Chin Fu-tung, the secretary-general of the ruling Kuomintang (KMT), lambasted Tsai Ing-wen, the chairwoman of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), for, among other things, defending Chen Chu, the DPP's mayor of the city of Kaohsiung, who had been widely criticized for serious dereliction of duty in the handling of the furious flooding in the city on Sept. 19.

Chin reminded the audience that Tsai said she was "so infuriated as to want to smash the TV" when learning that Hsueh Hsiang-chuan, then secretary-general of the Executive Yuan, attended a dinner party for his father-in-law on Father's Day last year while southern Taiwan was ravaged by a typhoon. Chin chided Tsai for applying double standards in steadfastly supporting Chen, who admitted under pressure that she was taking a nap while parts of Kaohsiung were submerged under water.

Now, almost everyone in Taiwan realizes that not merely Chen but her two deputy mayors as well were all sleeping in their respective residences at the time when their city was being inundated by water. This should be a history-making record in the annals of politics anywhere in the world.

Facing widespread criticisms and interrogations, Chen and her colleagues lied repeatedly to explain away their misbehavior. When realizing all their attempts at white-washing failed, Chen and her two deputies were forced to confess to their napping during office hours.

But, most shocking are the following developments:

1. So far, none of the top officials of Kaohsiung have stepped down to take the responsibility.

2. No causes of the flood have been pinpointed, no charges of the negligence of duty clearly answered and no remedies proposed to avoid future disasters.

3. Almost all top leaders of the DPP, including Tsai, have come to the quick defense of Mayor Chen, pleading for public understanding of the fatigue she had endured as a hard-working magistrate.

4. Despite all these happenings, Chen still leads in a three-way race in the elections for the mayoralty of Kaohsiung to be elevated as a special municipality at the end of this year.

In fact, latest opinion polls show that the extent of her popularity surpasses the combined approval ratings of her two opponents. Many political observers have pointed out that the arrogant and indifferent attitude of Chen and her colleagues in facing the critical public reaction to their flood management was indeed appalling, setting the worst example as honest and responsible elected officials in a modern democracy that they should be.

It may be true that Chen still enjoys popularity in Kaohsiung, a phenomenon that speaks for her ability to manipulate public opinion and the bewildering quality of the Kaohsiung people.

But such a tack of Chen's should not work in other parts of Taiwan where voters have different nature and nurture. This should, instead, provide a welcome opportunity to the KMT to highlight their attacks on the DPP and its candidates, in the current campaign, for lacking a thorough understanding of democratic politics.

'Great power politics' returns to world stage

By PETER APPS
LONDON, Reuters

From currency battles to computerized corporate espionage, fractious international conferences to a new scramble for Africa, "great power politics" is back on the map.

The growing power of emerging economies — particularly China, Russia, India and Brazil — is redrawing the priorities of foreign and defense ministries, driving financial markets and reshaping the global business environment.

Speaking in Geneva last month, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger compared the approach of powers "emerging into confident nationhood" to those of states in the 19th or early 20th centuries. Their rivalries eventually triggered the carnage of World War One.

The rise of China in particular is putting international relationships and systems into flux, Kissinger warned.

"Chaos may occur but when it does it will sooner or later settle down to some new order," he said — saying it was essential that statesmen managed this process well to "save humanity from untold suffering."

The global financial crisis of 2008 appeared to produce a fragile consensus on economic interdependence and regulatory reform at a G-20 summit in London in April 2009. But that has all but broken down.

International Monetary Fund Managing Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn lamented fading global cooperation this week.

"I think it's fair to say that momentum is not vanishing but decreasing and that's a real threat," he told a news confer-

ence ahead of twice-yearly IMF and World Bank meetings.

"Everybody has to keep in mind this mantra that there is no domestic solution to a global crisis," he said.

Private sector analysts see the change even more starkly.

"Even a year ago, they thought they needed each other," said Elizabeth Stephens, head of credit and political risk at London insurance broker Jardine Lloyd Thompson. "Now, it's survival of the fittest."

'Currency War'

Some say that was inevitable — not least because of growing imbalances in the global financial system and upward pressure on emerging nations' currencies.

Governments are relying on export-led growth to bring jobs and ensure social stability, inherently producing rivalry over foreign exchange and access to resources. Everyone wants a competitively weak currency and guaranteed cheap fuel and food.

China is at the centre of these tensions, due both to its currency, still effectively pegged to the dollar, and to its insatiable appetite for resources. But the unstable dynamics go beyond the Beijing-Washington axis, sometimes dubbed the "G-2."

The last month has seen a host of signs of the new world rivalries and disagreements that may point to what is to come.

There has been the growing rhetoric over what Brazil's finance minister warns may be an "international currency war," with key economies vying to weaken their exchange rates.

Governments fear a domestic backlash if they are seen to

blink first, potentially losing jobs to their rivals. The West wants rapid Chinese currency appreciation — but Beijing is strongly resistant, warning it could unleash social turmoil.

Brazil this week effectively increased capital controls and other emerging economies such as South Korea are considering following suit to control currency rises.

Fears of a repeat of Great Depression-style currency and trade tariff struggles dominated the run-up to the weekend's IMF and World Bank meetings as well as Friday's G-7 finance talks.

"If one lets this slide into conflict, or forms of protectionism, then we run the risk of repeating the mistakes of the 1930s," World Bank president Robert Zoellick told reporters.

In a more conventional national dispute, Beijing and Tokyo locked horns last month after Japan's coastguard detained a Chinese trawler skipper near disputed islands.

That escalated to an apparent de facto embargo of Chinese exports of "rare earth" minerals vital to Japanese industry before the ship's skipper was released.

Some see Japan and Asian nations' sovereign wealth funds following China and Middle Eastern powers in trying to lock down food, mineral and energy supplies in Africa and elsewhere. Those resource struggles may define the 21st century in the same way conventional wars defined the 20th, some say.

"We are now armed in a different way," said Michael Power, global strategist at Investec. "We shouldn't sensationalize this idea of a currency war — but

there is a modicum of truth that this is some kind of conflict."

He is not alone in that thinking. The U.S. Naval War College in Rhode Island is teaching mid-ranking officers more than ever before about finance and markets.

"There is growing appreciation for rising and resurgent powers and their abilities... to complicate U.S. freedom of action," said Nikolas Gvosdev, professor of national security at the college. "But there is also hope that effective U.S. outreach to "middle powers" could help constrain China, Russia and others to be more cooperative."

Cyber Threats

In a clue as to another form warfare may take in the years to come, Iranian computer systems last month came under attack from what analysts said was likely a "state-built" worm aimed at its nuclear program.

Many analysts suggested Israel or the United States were the likely points of origin — but cyber attacks offer an appealing deniability. A Reuters special report this week showed for the first time the scale of U.S. preparations to meet the threat — seem largely from emerging powers such as China and Russia.

"While economic interdependence makes conventional hot wars between major powers much less likely, the combination of a rapidly changing geopolitical balance and technological advances on offensive cyber attack capabilities will make state-sponsored industrial espionage a more serious outcome," said Ian Bremmer, president of political risk consultancy Eurasia Group.

In vitro fertilization is Frankenstein science

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

In this year's Nobel Prize, I'm disappointed with the awarding of the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine to Dr. Robert Edwards, a pioneer of in vitro fertilization.

In vitro fertilization is an evil — not a good — that has been unleashed upon mankind.

IVF is an artificial method of reproduction in which human embryos are produced in a laboratory where they are observed and manipulated. Here, a relationship of domination of researchers over their embryonic subjects exists which not only opens the door to new threats against life but is contrary to the dignity and equality that must be common to parents and children.

Science is in fact now discovering that the process of IVF can cause genetic defects that negatively alter the basic genetic constitution of the person and all of his or her future offspring.

In addition, when an IVF baby is born, the child will never grow to know how many of his or her siblings or other embryos, were created and murdered in the development of the procedure. Since the birth of the first IVF child over thirty years ago, well over two million embryos have been discarded, or frozen, or selectively aborted, or miscarried or used in destructive experiments. We would all do well to remember that we too were once human beings.

Human embryos are not raw materials to be exploited or commodities that can be bought and sold. To suggest otherwise is to endorse a macabre interpretation of progress. Pure and simple IVF is nothing more than Frankenstein science.

Paul Kokoski, Canada

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台北市中山區 104 撫順街 8 號

Tel: (02) 2596-9971 • Fax: (02) 2595-7962

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