

# China barely ahead of food disaster

by Mary M. Burdman

On April 8, Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng announced to the plenary meeting of the National People's Congress that new measures will be taken to enforce China's draconian one-child-per-couple population control policy. Leading up to that meeting, the Chinese Communists held three major policy conferences on the crisis in agriculture, and, as State Planning Commission Minister Zou Jiahua stated in his report to the "Rural Work" conference Feb. 28, China must make "considerably arduous efforts" to improve the supply of food for its people.

The food situation is tenuous. The bumper harvest of 1990 did not reach the per capita grain production of the record 1984 harvest, and population control remains as critical, if not more so, to Beijing's agricultural policy, as any attempts to improve food production.

In this light, the Sino-Soviet agreement reached at the end of February, for China to provide 1 billion Swiss francs' (about \$699 million) worth of credit, much of it for Moscow to buy food, indicates just how interested Beijing is in the Soviet regime's survival.

## Agricultural production 'unsatisfactory'

"The infrastructure and basic conditions of our agricultural production have not fundamentally improved," Zou reported. "The ability of our agriculture to resist natural disasters is still very poor, and the basis for further agricultural development remains insufficient. . . .

"The total grain output in 1990 was at an all-time high, but the per capita grain output was still below 1984 level, and so were the per capita outputs of cotton, oil-bearing crops, and sugar." Agricultural production is unsatisfactory in quality as well as quantity, Zou reported, both for food consumption and for supplying the growing light industry, including textiles.

One of the primary reasons for the 435 billion ton grain crop of 1990 was good weather, Chinese officials acknowledge, and already drought and floods are taking their toll this year. As important in food supply is the disastrous condition of China's storage and transport infrastructure. To fulfill the goals of the next five- and ten-year plans leading into 2000, grain production must reach 450 billion and 500 billion tons, respectively, just to supply a population growing by 17 million a year with the 394 kilos per capita reached in 1984. But two-thirds of China's cultivated land is only medium- or low-yield, and only 7% of its land-area is arable. With 20% of the world's population,

China clearly needs heavy investment to intensify production. Such investment is not available. A meeting of the Chinese Academy for Agricultural Sciences in Beijing March 13 "unanimously maintained that China's economic development will be restrained by the shortage of resources and the state's financial situation for a long time to come."

Finance Minister Wang Binqian informed the National People's Congress why, in his report on the budget March 26. China's budget deficit for 1990 was 6 billion yuan (\$1.6 billion) more than expected. One reason was that China's transport and grain-storage infrastructure was so inadequate, that whole new facilities had to be built on an emergency basis to deal with the 1990 harvest, Wang reported. Yet, despite the demand for an equivalent harvest this year, only 68 billion yuan (about \$12 per person) has been budgeted for capital construction overall in China this year.

## Targeting population

The Chinese Communist Party's malthusian response to this crisis is to redouble efforts to enforce the one-child policy. Li Peng announced April 8 that he is setting up a "target responsibility system" in which every level of the party must appoint officials in charge of birth control. The career of every official will depend on his success in curbing births in his region, Li said.

Particularly frightening for Beijing is the huge army of unemployed peasants. On March 20, the Ministry of Agriculture issued a bulletin about settling "surplus labor" in rural areas, stating that people had been "pouring" into cities in economically developed coastal areas, obstructing the normal operation of highways and railways and causing many social problems. "The greatest efforts," the bulletin stated, must be made "to keep these labor forces from leaving their home areas."

To that end, the Ministry of Public Security issued 755 million identification cards by the end of last year, and "the use and checking of ID cards is now possible across the nation." Most of the functional departments of the public security organs have made the checking of ID cards "an important part" of their duty, a spokesman said.

China expects a surplus labor force of 200 million by the next decade, and has no means to employ or support these people. As the head of the Academy of Social Sciences, Liu Guoguang, wrote Feb. 22 in an article published in Hong Kong, China urgently needs social security measures, or "society cannot stand bankruptcy of enterprises and unemployment. The readjustment of the structure and improvement of economic returns will be rendered empty talk."

At this point, almost 100,000 laborers are arriving in Guangdong province on the coast from the interior every day, Xinhua reported March 1. With the number of surplus laborers in Guangdong already massive, the new arrivals are causing "tremendous pressure on society," many living and begging on the street.