

Xi bids New Year greetings to non-Communist parties

Chinese President Xi Jinping Sunday attended a gathering in Beijing and extended Lunar New Year greetings to people from non-Communist parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, and those without party affiliation.

Xi, also general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission, called on non-Communist parties and personnel to uphold the leadership of the CPC and give suggestions for CPC governance.

Senior leaders Yu Zhengsheng and Zhang Gaoli also attended the event.

After listening to a speech by a representative of non-Communist parties, Xi expressed appreciation for the CPC's united front work and contributions made by non-Communist parties last year.

He also stressed the importance of consensus and joint efforts among the CPC and the non-Communist parties, the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, and those without party affiliation.

Xi expressed hope that non-Communist parties and personnel would support creating a good environment for the 19th National Congress of the CPC, which is scheduled for this year, and pool wisdom and strength for the implementation of the CPC Central Committee's decisions.

He called on relevant people to give suggestions for the country's reform and development and ensure stability, as well as those that related to public concerns.

He further noted the importance of the proper selection of personnel and officials in non-Communist parties.

He said that CPC committees at all levels should support non-Communist parties and people without party affiliation in carrying out their duties.

Moreover, he said the ruling party should be open-minded in following others' good suggestions, and it was an important duty for non-Communist parties to let voices from across spectrum, including criticism, be heard by the ruling party and to give their advice truthfully.

Relocation to support 'ecological migrants'

A mass resettlement project for "ecological migrants" in China does not force ethnic groups to abandon their traditional culture and way of living, a senior official said on Sunday.

Zhang Yongli, deputy head of the State Forestry Administration, made the remarks during a news conference held by the State Council Information Office. He was asked by a reporter whether ecological migrants are struggling under a government-led project, thought to be the world's largest environmental migration project.

"The areas where the migrants come from do not have even the most basic facilities required for human survival and development," he said. "This would make it impossible for them to maintain their traditional culture and way of living.

"The project aims to help migrants improve their living standards, so their cultural heritage can be protected and passed down better than before," he added.

According to the State Forestry Administration, areas affected by desertification and sandification account for nearly 20 percent of China's territory. In some areas, land sandification is expanding, with another 310,000 square kilometers likely to suffer from sandification in the near future.

Against this backdrop, many people in the Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Ningxia Hui autonomous regions, as well as Gansu and Qinghai provinces, had to leave their homes, which had become distressed by desertification, climate change, industrialization and human activities.

Jia Yaofeng, a professor at Beifang University of Nationalities and an expert on climate change, said China started ecological migration exploration as early as 1983 when the central government targeted three regions in Gansu and Ningxia Hui autonomous region. The project was then expanded to include more regions that were struggling with poverty and desertification.

"Based on the results in central and western areas of China, moving people out of their homes has helped to mitigate local environmental pressure and helped migrants to improve their lives," Jia said. "However, we must admit that there are problems brought by mass resettlement."

Wang Yuming, vice-chairman of the government of the Inner Mongolia autonomous region, said all resettlement is proceeding based on the will of local residents. "We have relocated more than 200,000 people and we will relocate another 200,000."

He added that places that embrace ecological migrants have mature industries.

“Resettlement encourages local urbanization. Urbanization means more job opportunities, and people want to move to cities where jobs are available,” he said.

Second-child policy increases births by 7.9%

The universal second-child policy implemented early last year was a major factor in raising the number of births in China to 17.86 million last year, an increase of 7.9 percent and the highest annual number since since 2000, according to the top health authority.

The number of newborns has increased by 1.31 million compared with 2015.

The portion of the births to couples who already had at least one child rose quickly to at least 45 percent last year, Yang Wenzhuang, a division director of the National Health and Family Planning Commission, said at a news conference on Sunday. The proportion was around 30 percent before 2013.

“It demonstrates that the universal second-child policy came in time and worked effectively,” Yang said.

“Some regions, mostly large cities in eastern areas, began recording second children as comprising more than half of local newborns,” he added.

Yang expected that by 2020, the number of new births each year would stand between 17 to 20 million in China, citing expert estimations.

Last week, Ma Xiaowei, deputy director of the commission, said a baby boom triggered largely by the new policy probably would come within the next two years.

For that, the commission plans to add 140,000 more maternity health workers in the coming years, he said.

The top decision-makers intensified efforts in late 2013 to adjust birth policies in place for three decades that limited most couples to just one child, aiming at addressing major demographic challenges such as an aging population and a looming labor shortage.

Starting in early 2014, couples in which one was an only child could have a second child. The universal second-child policy was implemented at the start of 2016.

“The long-term effect of the universal second-child policy is very helpful to China’s sustainable development,” said Yuan Xin, a professor of population studies at Nankai University in Tianjin.

By 2050, the policy is expected to bring about an extra 30 million working-age people and reduce the nation's aging rate by 2 percent, commission projections show.

But matching policies have not yet been refined to provide good support for couples willing to have more than one child, particularly in terms of maternity education and health services, Yang conceded.

A 2015 survey by the commission found nearly 75 percent of respondents were reluctant to have a second baby, largely due to economic burdens.

Other major concerns are age, parents' career development, and a lack of caregivers, it showed. Yuan suggested the government introduce support measures like favorable tax policies, prolonged maternity leave and education for families with two children.

As a byproduct of socioeconomic development, people tend to have smaller families, even with no birth limits, he said. "Now we might need to consider incentives for people to have more children."

In the mid-1950s, the average number of annual births was around 18 million, almost the same as in 2016. But the fertility rate (the average number of children a woman will have during her life) has dropped from more than six then to less than two.

[China schedules Chang'e-5 lunar probe launch](#)

China plans to launch the Chang'e-5 lunar probe at the end of November this year, from the Wenchang Space Launch Center in southern China's Hainan Province, aboard the heavy-lift carrier rocket Long March-5.

The mission will be China's first automated moon surface sampling, first moon take-off, first unmanned docking in a lunar orbit about 380,000 km from earth, and first return flight in a speed close to second cosmic velocity, according to the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC).

"With a weight of 8.2 tonnes, the lunar probe is comprised of four parts: an orbiter, a returner, an ascender and a lander," said Ye Peijian, one of China's leading aerospace experts and a consultant to the program.

The lander will put moon samples in a vessel in the ascender after the moon landing. Then the ascender will take off from the moon to dock with the orbiter and the returner orbiting the moon, and transfer the samples to the returner.

The orbiter and returner then head back to the earth, separating from each other when they are several thousands kilometers from earth. Finally, the returner will reenter the earth.

The development of Chang'e-5 has entered the end of its flight model phase, and relevant work is proceeding smoothly, according to CASC.

China plans to fulfill three strategic steps with the launch of Chang'e-5, "orbiting, landing and returning."

The country also plans to launch the Chang'e-4 lunar probe around 2018 to achieve mankind's first soft landing on the far side of the moon, and to conduct an in situ and roving detection and relay communications at earth-moon L2 point, according to the China National Space Administration.

"The country plans to send robots to explore both lunar poles," said the administration's vice director Wu Yanhua late last year, adding that plans to send astronauts to the moon were also being discussed.

[China makes progress in fight against desertification](#)

China will step up efforts to fight desertification to meet a global target of halting net land degradation by 2030, a senior official said Sunday.

The country plans to rehabilitate more than 11,300 square kilometers of severely desertified farmland in the next three years at a cost of at least 27.2 billion yuan (about 4 billion U.S. dollars), Zhang Yongli, deputy head of State Forestry Administration, said at a press conference.

Zhang said China will enhance vegetation protection on desert land and improve compensation mechanisms to reward localities working toward fighting desertification.

China will also strengthen international cooperation, especially with countries along the Belt and Road, to reverse desertification, Zhang said.

Expanding deserts are a global challenge. It is estimated that one-third of the earth is exposed to desertification, affecting millions of people.

China has spent decades curbing desertification through greening. It has effectively contained desertification, with desertified land area shrinking continuously during the past decade.

The area of its desertified land totaled 1.72 million square kilometers at the end of 2014, nearly one fifth of the country, down 9,900 square kilometers from 2009.