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China's One-Child Policy No Longer Necessary, Mahbubani Says

By Sharon Chen on February 07, 2013

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China's one-child policy adopted in the late 1970s may no longer be necessary as its middle class grows and its population ages, according to Singapore's former ambassador to the United Nations.

The demographic shift in Asia's largest economy highlights challenges faced by governments across the region as Singapore's Parliament this week debates its population trajectory through the next decade, Kishore Mahbubani said in an interview with Tom Keene on Bloomberg Radio yesterday.

"At some point in time, China will have to wake up and say that its one-child policy is no longer necessary in China today," said Mahbubani, who is now dean of the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. The nation may "grow old before it grows rich," he said.

China's economy will probably cross a threshold between 2020 and 2025 when the supply of low-cost workers runs out, necessitating a shift in the nation's growth model, according to an International Monetary Fund working paper last month. Researchers from the world's most populous nation said last year the government should ease the one-child policy as soon as possible to cope with an aging population and labor shortage.

Chinese incomes rose faster in the countryside than in cities for a third straight year in 2012, a trend that may persist for a while as a declining working-age population helps push up migrant laborers' pay. Rural per-capita net income, which includes migrant workers' wages, rose more than that of urban residents in 2010 for the first time since 1997.

Middle Class

"Most people who are looking at Asia believe that you can be very optimistic with what is coming," as its middle class grows and the UN achieves its goal of halving global poverty by 2015, Mahbubani said.

The emerging middle classes will make more demands on their governments, such as demanding more action to curb pollution, he said.

U.S. President Barack Obama must convince countries such as China and India to agree to a UN treaty that would limit fossil-fuel emissions starting in 2020 in order for it to be effective, former aides said at a December conference in Doha.

"The Asian leaders are only now beginning to realize, hey, we are doing so well our time has come, and now we need to do more in terms of taking care of global challenges," Mahbubani said. "How they will actually behave, well, actually a lot will depend on how they are treated."

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