

NEW ZEALAND OPPOSITION DRAWS IRE TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

WELLINGTON: New Zealand's main opposition party yesterday announced plans to almost halve immigration numbers if it wins a September election, with the clampdown focused on international students. Labour Party leader Andrew Little said it was "time for a breather on immigration" in the nation, which has experienced record annual net arrivals of about 70,000 in recent years.

Little said his centre-left party would

cut that by up to 30,000 a year, including slashing an estimated 22,000 student visas. He said the nation of 4.5 million could not cope with existing migration levels. "It's contributed to the housing crisis, put pressure on hospitals and schools and added to congestion on roads," he said. Little said parts of New Zealand's international education sector had become a "back door to residency" which he planned to close if he won the

September 23 national election.

Under the plan, visas for many "low value" courses that do not involve at least a bachelor's degree would be cut. Work visas for international students and recent graduates would also be tightened to stop them taking low-skilled jobs unrelated to their course. Prime Minister Bill English said the policy would have a major impact on the economy, which is growing at a relatively strong three percent annual-

ly. "Slashing immigration-whatever you think of it-slashing it when you need the people to do the jobs that must be done, it doesn't make any sense," he told Radio New Zealand. English also said the crackdown risked jeopardizing the international education sector, New Zealand's fourth-largest export earner. "This is a sector that has been a key part of diversifying our economy, particularly through the difficult times when dairy prices were low," he said.

"It employs 33,000 people and generates NZ\$4.5 billion (\$3.2 billion) in exports."

English took over leadership of the ruling National Party-led coalition in December after the shock resignation of his predecessor John Key. National currently leads Labour 49 percent to 30 percent in opinion polling for the September vote, but the gap narrows to less than one percent if potential coalition partners for Little are factored in. — AFP

ELEPHANT IN BUDDHIST PROCESSION KILLS MONK

COLOMBO: An elephant that was part of a Sri Lankan Buddhist procession attacked and killed a monk, police said yesterday. Police spokesman Priyantha Jayakody said three elephants were walking in the procession Sunday night when one suddenly went on a rampage and attacked the monk. The 25-year-old monk died at a hospital early Monday. Colorfully decorated elephants are an important part of Buddhist religious processions and festivals. Temples and wealthy families often own the animals and rent them out for such events.

However, animal rights activists say the elephants are often kept in inhumane conditions and receive insufficient food.

Authorities say there are about 127 tamed elephants that are used for processions and other religious ceremonies by Sinhalese Buddhists, who make up 70 percent of the island's 20 million people. Having an elephant in the backyard has long been a sign of wealth, privilege and power. For hundreds of years, elephants have been used for such religious activities and as well as for battles by ancient kings. Sri Lanka has about 6,000 elephants, but those in the wild are threatened by habitat loss and degradation. An estimated 200 elephants are killed every year, mainly by farmers trying to protect their crops. In the 19th century there were believed to be up to 14,000 elephants. — AFP

CHINA PONDERES PUBLIC MORALITY AFTER VIDEO OF GRUESOME DEATH

BEIJING: A speeding taxi knocks the pedestrian off her feet, sending her hurtling through the air. Dozens of people stand gawking or walk past, as if the young woman sprawled in the busy intersection simply doesn't exist. A full minute passes, and another speeding vehicle, this time an SUV, tramples the prone woman. Her unconscious body churns under its large wheels like a lumpen sack.

After a grainy video of a traffic accident in the city of Zhumadian surfaced on Chinese social media this past week, the initial reaction was one of outrage directed at the more than 40 pedestrians and drivers who passed within meters of the woman, all failing to offer help. But for many Chinese, the video was something more: a 94-second reminder of their society's deep rot.

Even as China presents itself outwardly as a prosperous rising power, around kitchen tables and in private WeChat groups, Chinese citizens routinely grumble about a nation that's gone bankrupt when it comes to two qualities: "suzhi," or "personal character," and "dixian," literally "bottom line" - or a basic, inviolable sense of right and wrong.

Unmoored country

Here, the common refrain goes, is an unmoored country where manufacturers knowingly sell toxic baby formula and fraudulent children's vaccines. Restaurants cook with recycled "gutter oil" and grocery stores peddle fake eggs, fake fruit, even fake rice. Many Chinese say they avoid helping people on the street because of widespread stories about extortionists who seek help from passers-by and then feign injuries and demand compensation - perhaps explaining the Zhumadian behavior.

"It's a problem with the entire country: Our moral bottom line has fallen so low," Tian You, a novelist based in the southeastern city of Shenzhen, said by phone. "If I'm truly honest, I wonder, would I myself have dared to help the woman?" After the Zhumadian video surfaced this week, garnering more than 5 million views in its first 24 hours before being censored, local police were forced to disclose that the incident took place weeks earlier, on April 21. The woman, surnamed Ma, died, while the two drivers who hit her were held under investigation, police said, without giving further details.

The news swept through social media and even state media outlets. The Communist Youth League, an influential party organization, circulated the video on its Weibo account, urging its 5 million followers to "reject indifference." An opinion column on china.com, a state media organ, asked citizens to "reflect" on the tragedy. Others used the episode as a starting point to vent about social ills.

"Like the polluted haze facing our country, we see boundless corruption, left-behind children, medical disputes and so forth," a columnist in the Chengdu Economic Daily wrote. "Have our society's morals gotten better or worse in the last 10 years?"

What about our future, are you confident about that? Don't ask me, because I'm not."

Moral decay

Public concern about China's morals crosses decades and age groups. Ever since China began its free market reforms in the 1980s, older citizens have frequently griped about moral decay and profess nostalgia about a more innocent socialist era, while younger, worldly Chinese wonder why fraud and fake products aren't as rampant in other countries. Chinese scholars say many issues that leave the middle class disillusioned are a result of lagging government regulation and the dislocating forces of swift development.

"In the West, law, faith and morality are a three-legged stool," said Ma Ai, a sociologist at the China University of Political Science and Law. "Our legal system is catching up, but we don't have religion and a new moral system has not established after China transformed away from a traditional, collectivist society."

A debate flared following a similar case in 2011, when an unattended 2-year old was hit by a truck on a busy street in Guangdong province and laid in a pool of blood without any help from bystanders for seven minutes. She died later. In the following years, several cities, including Beijing and Shanghai, enacted Good Samaritan laws. To be sure, examples of bystander apathy are ubiquitous, from the case of Kitty Genovese, the woman stabbed to death in daylight in a New York City apartment complex in 1964, to last year in Chicago, where a man who was knocked unconscious in an assault was run over and killed by a taxi after a group of bystanders walked away from him.

In India, a video showed a man unsuccessfully pleading for help following a road accident that killed his wife and child in 2013. That same year, passers-by refused to stop to help a naked, bleeding gang-rape victim after she was dumped from a bus onto a New Delhi street. The 23-year-old student died of her injuries. But the Chinese have been particularly self-critical on the matter. In 2009, the People's Daily, the Communist Party's official mouthpiece, ran a provocative story with a picture of a dog standing by another injured dog in a busy street and pondered whether humans would do the same. The report was headlined, "Do Chinese people lack compassion?"

'Faith and ethics'

A 2014 state media poll found that Chinese thought "lacking faith and ethics" was the No. 1 social problem, followed by "being a bystander or being selfish." Many in China's intelligentsia reject the idea that an ancient strain of Chinese culture that focuses on the immediate family explains modern tragedies like Zhumadian. Confucius, after all, taught the Golden Rule. And Mencius, another revered philosopher, urged his disciples to love others' children and respect others' parents as one would their own.—AFP



TOKYO This file photo taken on May 24, 2017 shows 11-year-old female giant panda Shin Shin taking a rest in her cage at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo. — AFP photos

JAPAN ZOO TOASTS BIRTH OF PANDA CUB, SNUG IN MUM'S FURRY HUG

TOKYO: A Japanese zoo celebrated the first birth of a baby panda in five years yesterday, with the tiny cub small enough to fit in the palm of a human hand. Eleven-year-old mum Shin Shin gave birth just before noon, officials at Tokyo's Ueno Zoo said in a statement. Pandas are born pink, hairless and weighing around 100 grams (three-and-a-half ounces) — so small it can be difficult to determine their sex.

"There have been cases where the sex of a panda has been found to be wrongly determined several years after its birth," a zoo spokesman told AFP amid the panda-monium. "It could take a while before we know." Shin Shin, who mated with male Ri Ri in February, had another baby in 2012 the first time at the zoo in 24 years, but the cub died from pneumonia six days later. Footage from a camera inside the panda enclosure showed the moment of birth, when the screeching noises of the tiny baby could clearly be heard as Shin Shin scooped it up with her mouth.

Zoo officials were not immediately able to give exact details about the size and weight of the cub as the proud mum, who tips the scales at 110 kilograms (240 pounds), protectively cuddled her new-born baby. "Most of the time the mother has been cradling her baby so we haven't been able to measure it precisely," a spokeswoman told AFP. "It's almost impossible to see the baby when she's being hugged by mum but we estimate it at about 150 grams."

As a mother-to-be, Shin Shin delighted huge crowds of well-wishers in Tokyo last month as she sat lazily munching on bamboo and playfully rubbed the husks on her furry belly before being moved into confinement. Considered an endangered species, it is estimated fewer than 2,000 giant pandas remain in the wild, in three provinces in south-central China.

Clumsy lovers

Giant pandas are painfully bashful animals and clumsy lovers, with males often miscalculating when a female is in the mood for love and frequently baffled by the mechanics of mating, according to experts. In the event the cuddly creatures do feel a romantic spark, sex is frequently over too quickly to impregnate the female, who is only receptive to the proposition for two or three days a year between February and May.

Shin Shin's happy news was broadcast on national television and has already had an economic impact on local businesses, with one Chinese restaurant's shares soaring by 38 percent in response. The Totenk chain, whose main outlet is near the zoo, already reported a jump last month on news of a possible pregnancy. The birth could also potentially help thaw the often frosty diplomatic relations between Japan and China as Beijing caught the celebratory mood.

"Giant pandas are always messengers of friendship from China towards other countries," said foreign affairs ministry spokesman Lu Kang. "We also hope giant pandas can play a greater role to promote the affection between Chinese and Japanese people." Tokyo governor Yuriko Koike also expressed her delight, telling local media: "Romance is not just restricted to humans."

Meanwhile, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga, the government's top spokesman, showed his softer side as he weighed in on the day's top feel-good story. "It is news that will brighten the whole country," he told a daily news briefing. "I wonder why pandas are so popular. It's probably their cute faces and adorable gestures." —AFP



TOKYO: An employee of a department store in Tokyo's Ueno shopping district distributes paper masks showing a baby panda to celebrate the birth of a baby panda at the nearby zoo.

FLOWER POWER: GARDENING USED AS THERAPY IN POLAND

RUSKIE PIASKI: An elderly woman leans over to smell a lush flowerbed of lavender in sprawling gardens surrounding an imposing early 20th-century palace in a pastoral corner of eastern Poland. Slowly a smile lights up her face, erasing her previous stony expression-she suffers from paranoid schizophrenia which often renders her emotionless. The sudden burst of happiness is one of the benefits of horticulture, or garden therapy, as it is better known. She is among 59 female patients at this state-run, mental health care home in the village of Ruskie Piaski who are undergoing the springtime treatment, introduced here in 2014.

"Gardens provide an environment that stimulates many senses; the patient can smell the scents of flowers and plants, touch them, and even get pricked by thorns," says biological scientist Bozena Szewczyk-Taranek, who has created a horticultural therapy training course at the Agricultural University of Krakow, due to start in September. "It also facilitates physical exercise, for example for patients who have problems with balance, they can hop from one stone to another. "But when we have intellectually-impaired patients, we must make sure there are no toxic plants in the gardens like yews, hydrangeas or lily of the valley," she told AFP in an interview.

Walking on pebbles

The positive influence of a garden on the ill is thought to have already been known in Ancient Egypt, but modern therapy dates back to the 19th century and was used to help soldiers wounded in World War I. While horticultural therapy does not cure mental illness, it can stimulate patients both intellectually and socially, boosting their self-confidence and sense of well-being, experts say.

Even just getting them out of their rooms into the fresh air can help by improving their physical condition. Alina Anasiewicz, the director of the Ruskie Piaski care home which is one of the leading centres in Poland for garden therapy, says she came across it on a 2013 study trip to Switzerland. "We brought home quite a few of the methods we learnt from the Swiss," she told AFP. She points proudly to a fountain, where, on hot days, patients can touch the flowing water

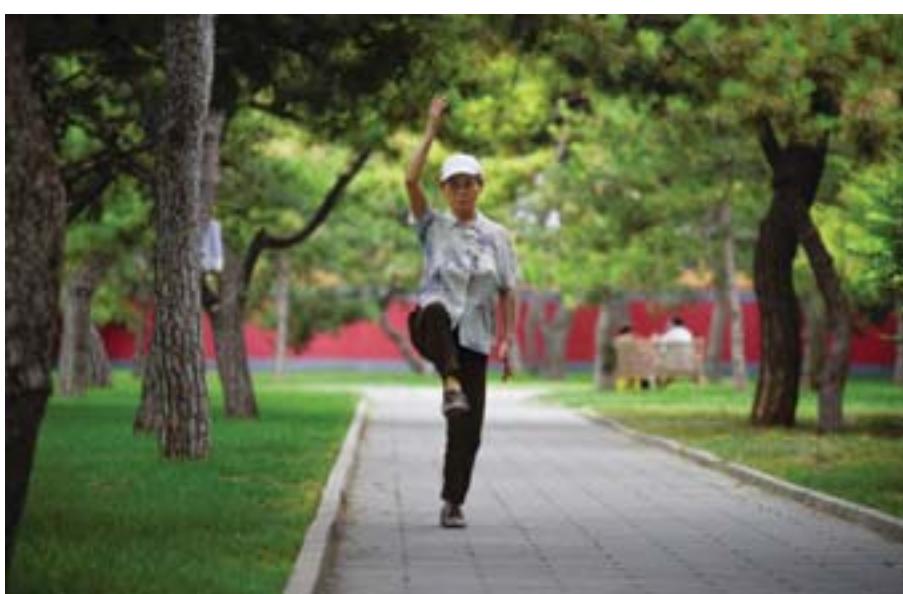
and wade into a small pool with pebbles lining the bottom that tickle their feet.

'Changing mentality'

To reach the fountain, patients must walk barefoot along a "sensory path", of gravel, sand and wooden logs, allowing the varied textures to stimulate their senses. On the other side of the palace, three patients are working hard, digging a vegetable garden. Anasiewicz says that later they will also make preserves from the vegetables and berries they grow and harvest. She says that, while the progress made by patients undergoing garden therapy is obvious to her, some of the staff who had been working at the centre for years needed convincing about this novel approach to mental health. "It's sometimes easier to do all the hands-on renovation work for the gardens than to change the mentality of our staff," Anasiewicz told AFP.

Closing the gap

In 2013, Switzerland handed her a check for 1.4 million zloty (330,000 euros, \$370,000) to create the therapeutic park, with flower and vegetable gardens as well as an orchard, at the care home. The sum covered 85 percent of the project, with local authorities chipping in the rest. While it is not a member of the European Union, Switzerland set up a financing program a decade ago to help reduce disparities between wealthier old EU members and poorer new ones, such as Poland. It spent a total of 1.3 billion Swiss francs (1.2 billion euros, \$1.4 billion), of which Poland received almost half a billion. The funds were spent on 58 projects across Poland, many focused on health, including the removal of asbestos from the roofs of houses — 131,000 tons in all—and installing hectares of solar panels. Patients at the Ruskie Piaski care home can stay as long as their condition requires medical supervision and are able to leave for family visits or have visitors, but their daily garden therapy can depend on the weather. Staff say that when the weather is bad or in winter, patients are more depressed. One went on a visit to see her family, but asked to return earlier than planned. She'd said simply, "I miss the garden," they explained. — AFP



BEIJING: An elderly woman practices tai chi at a park. — AFP