

## China's helping hand to minorities seeks to grasp stability

Every Friday, farmers descend from the mountains to make their way over dusty country roads to offer their produce at the weekly market in Chong'an, a town in China's poor southwestern province of Guizhou.

Many of them wear traditional garb and handmade shoes and carry chickens or ears of corn in baskets attached to long wooden poles that weigh on their shoulders.

Most of them are members of ethnic minorities with exotic names like Miao, Dong or Ge. Their faces are tanned and furrowed from the sun and long hours in the fields.

Guizhou province has China's highest concentration of ethnic minorities, and many of them live like their communities have done for hundreds of years: without access to electricity, clean drinking water or education.

They are among 100 million people in China who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group, the Han, and have gained few benefits from the country's economic boom.

Minorities account for eight percent of China's population and about half of the poorest Chinese, according to state media.

The central government in Beijing recently resolved to lend stronger support to the country's 55 national minorities.

Critics have accused the government of not having done enough in the past for these 'forgotten people'.

'Up until now, Beijing has not implemented development policies tailored to areas populated by minorities,' said Thomas Heberer, professor of political sciences at Germany's Duisburg-Essen University who specialises in Asian studies.

Development measures instead frequently ignore local conditions relating to 'special urban development needs, specific lifestyles, and traditional and religious perceptions of nature and environment', Heberer said.

Chinese minorities like the Tibetans in the Himalayas, the Dai in the southern province of Yunnan or the Uigurs in Xinjiang in the west often live in inhospitable mountain or desert regions and frequently have to cope with natural disasters.

Near Chong'an in a mountain village populated by the Dong minority, corn lies spread out on large bamboo mats while a group of women sort out the bad kernels.

Corn and rice are the principle crops grown by the Dong, but a persistent drought destroyed a large part of the harvest this year.

'It was much too hot this summer,' one of the women complained.

But many of Guizhou's minorities hold on to their lives in remote areas at the end of treacherous mountain paths. Some of them even seem to have excluded themselves from China's economic upturn.

'Some of the ethnic minorities are wary of the economic boom because they fear that apart from social changes, it also brings about increasing influence by the Han,' Heberer said.

The authorities, therefore, regard the unequal distribution of wealth among China's population not only as an economic issue, but also see development aid as a way to stabilize the central government's power.

Movements to achieve political independence from Beijing by large ethnic groups such as the Tibetans and the Uigurs have been suppressed by the central government for decades. The feeling of being neglected might further fuel those groups' longings for independence.

'Local governments should improve the infrastructures in the areas inhabited by ethnic minority groups and help them develop industries that fit with local conditions,' Jia Qinglin, chairperson of the government-appointed People's Political Consultative Conference, a political advisory body, suggested recently to alleviate such a threat.

This year, Beijing allocated 21 billion yuan (\$2.83 billion) to minority regions, 5.4 billion yuan more than in 2006.

In Kaili, Guizhou's second-largest city, numerous newly paved roads bear witness to this development offensive.

'There are now specific programmes to fight poverty, some of which are indeed bearing fruit,' Heberer said.

Through such initiatives, targeted minorities could increasingly see some benefits from the country's economic boom - although far from the progress seen by the majority Han in prosperous eastern China.

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