

Feature

Tortuous transition

In the 10 years since peaceful demonstrations brought down the Communist People's Republic of Mongolia, this vast, sparsely populated Central Asian nation has been struggling to transform itself into a free-market democracy

By J L Hazelton, AP
Ulan Bator

HERE'S homegrown rap on the radio. Black-clad youths saunter down the streets along with nomads in traditional bright wool jackets.

Everything is for sale. Satellite phone calls. Apples and antifreeze. Cocker spaniel puppies. If you have the money.

Ulan Bator, with its rocky patches of bare ground, half-finished buildings, concrete slabs of Soviet-era architecture and people convinced driving is a freestyle sport, has the feel of a chrysalis, a city on the verge.

In the 10 years since peaceful demonstrations brought down the Communist People's Republic of Mongolia, this vast, sparsely populated Central Asian nation has been struggling to transform itself into a free-market democracy.

"The transition," as everyone calls it here, has been tough. Some are striking it rich, while others sink into persistent poverty. Mongolians are trying to think like entrepreneurs and voters, rather than looking at their jobs and rulers as permanencies.

Despite power struggles at Government House, Mongolians seem determined to continue their experiment with democracy and free markets. But how to do that is still in question.

After the pain of the past 10 years, the appeal of leftists favouring greater state control of the economy and higher wages is strong, and parliamentary elections are coming up this summer.

"I wouldn't say bad things about the previous society, but I also wouldn't deny all the good things brought by democracy today," said Paganasuren, a 56-year-old grandmother who like many Mongolians uses only one name.

The latest challenge for Mongolia is natural disaster. Drought, overgrazing, and an unusually cold and snowy winter have brought mass starvation of livestock.

Camels, goats, sheep, horses and cattle provide everything from food and fuel to barter goods for the approximately one-third of Mongolians who still live a nomadic life.

The death toll could rise to five million heads out of a herd of 33.5 million, a devastating percentage in an agricultural culture.

Prone to stoicism, Mongolians are taking it in stride. After all, times were tough before, too.

After Soviet aid ended in 1990-91 with the collapse of the Soviet Union, everything stopped working. The power plants. The factories. The people.

discussing his joblessness. "I don't feel jealous when I see the guys driving Mercedes around town."

Hatanbaatar's daughter, a round four-year-old in boots with turned-up toes, squirms into his lap, offering comfort.

Mercedes can be found bouncing along Ulan Bator's crumbling roads, along with some big, shiny, four-wheel-drive sports utility vehicles.

They share the streets with battered little Soviet-era Ladas and horse-drawn carts.

Hatanbaatar's mother is optimistic despite the hardship.

"I had a better life before, with the Communists, but today I'm full of belief that my life will get better," Paganasuren says.

"Everyone had jobs, so we didn't suffer any financial problems. We never went without food," she adds eagerly from her perch on the bed. "Today my whole family has a hard life. No one has a job. Night and day I dream that one of my children will get a job."

The kind of people who drive Mercedes include a handful of newly rich young men who created their own jobs.

One of these entrepreneurs is Eddie Yadamuren, a whirlwind of energy at 34 known to everyone here by just his first name.

His cell phone is always at

hand. There's a fashionable stubble on his round cheeks. His cargo pants could have come straight from the Gap.

With his brother-in-law, who knows how to cook, Eddie parlayed the dollars. 9,000 he sank into opening a pizza place three years ago into a group of restaurants worth more than dollars 100,000. That's a lot of money in Mongolia, where a loaf of bread costs 150 tugriks, or about 15 cents.

Not everyone is rising with the tide.

Hatanbaatar, Paganasuren's 32-year-old son, hasn't had a job in three years.

His working life began with the fall of the People's Republic in 1990, when he graduated from the Military Institute and went to work for the Defence Ministry as a mechanic.

Laid off four years later, he worked at a power station for a few years, got laid off again, and there has been nothing regular since.

Sitting in his grandmother's little white house in a poor settlement on the outskirts of Ulan Bator, in his Nike cap and Harvard Funds T-shirt, he's a walking advertisement for globalisation.

And he's learned the No. 1 lesson of capitalism: Personal responsibility.

"This was completely dependent on me," he says quietly. Eddie's upbringing set him up for success. His father was a director at a big state-owned company, and his mother travelled widely as an official of the Foreign Trade Ministry.

"Maybe she influenced me to dream about the West," says Eddie, who nevertheless grows misty-eyed recalling the sense of community he remembers from Communist days. "My parents gave me this, the opportunity to see the world with different eyes."

But Eddie doesn't welcome all the changes. He's worried about corruption. And people are longing for a strong leader who will take their side.

The politicians today, Eddie says, "take care of the big businesses, but forget the people."

Since the revolution, power has seesawed between reformers and leftists.

Mongolians have not turned their backs on communism — Lenin's statue still stands in Ulan Bator — but 70 years of collectivisation left a legacy of dependence.

"Help will be there within the hour."

And within an hour, a speedboat arrived at the Manushmara Char, a landmass emerging out of the river Brahmaputra, and whisked the patient away to the government hospital on the mainland. Both the woman and her newborn were saved. Full credit goes to the Char Development Project of RDRS.

Launched about nine months ago, the project covers the char areas in Kuriagram with the objective of helping people living on these remote shoals. The programmes of RDRS here are much the same as those of this NGO on the mainland in the Greater Rangpur-Dinajpur region. Credit programme, awareness building, skill training, advocacy training, a satellite antenatal clinic are all there; but, due to obvious reasons, more emphasis is put on disaster preparedness.

"They really do want to have free markets here," says Doug McGay of Harrods Minerals Mongolia Ltd. "To me it's the place of the future for resources."

McGay, an Australian, expects Mongolia to grow rich on its minerals and hopes to reap his share of the wealth.

Hatanbaatar, the jobless man, sounds equally positive when he looks ahead to the summer elections.

"I think the lives of many depend on the government, and soon we'll have parliamentary elections, so everyone, to have a better life, should make good choices voting," he says.

So what is the right choice for Hatanbaatar?

Not the reformers. Not again. He's voting for the former Communists.

With cyclones and floods being an integral part of life in Bangladesh, and more particularly in the char areas, disaster management is an essential component of the programme. Developing hilly land on these sandbars is also part of the project.

The project is funded partly by the Stromme Memorial Foundation, Norway; and RDRS. Recently, after the 1998



The speedboat comes handy in times of emergency

Safety on the sandbars

Bleak landscape of the landmass arising from the depths of the river Brahmaputra may give forth a picture of desolation and despair. But the hardy char-dwellers are no longer fazed by the onslaughts of natural calamities or poverty. The RDRS Char Development Project has proved to be a source of inspiration for the people on the sandbars in the remote regions in the north, PROBE News Agency reports

MANUSHMARA

calling Kuriagram, Manushmara

calling Kurigram...," blared the

transmitter. Urgency was palpable in the caller's voice.

"Kurigram here, go ahead."

The response was immediate.

"We have an emergency maternity case here. A woman needs to be taken to a hospital on the mainland immediately. It's a matter of life and death."

"Help will be there within the hour."

And within an hour, a speedboat arrived at the Manushmara Char, a landmass

emerging out of the river Brahmaputra, and whisked the patient away to the government hospital on the mainland. Both the woman and her newborn were saved. Full credit goes to the Char Development Project of RDRS.

Launched about nine months ago, the project covers the char areas in Kuriagram with the objective of helping people living on these remote shoals. The programmes of RDRS here are much the same as those of this NGO on the mainland in the Greater Rangpur-Dinajpur region. Credit programme, awareness building, skill training, advocacy training, a satellite antenatal clinic are all there; but, due to obvious reasons, more emphasis is put on disaster preparedness.

"They really do want to have free markets here," says Doug McGay of Harrods Minerals Mongolia Ltd. "To me it's the place of the future for resources."

McGay, an Australian, expects Mongolia to grow rich on its minerals and hopes to reap his share of the wealth.

Hatanbaatar, the jobless man, sounds equally positive when he looks ahead to the summer elections.

"I think the lives of many depend on the government, and soon we'll have parliamentary elections, so everyone, to have a better life, should make good choices voting," he says.

So what is the right choice for Hatanbaatar?

Not the reformers. Not again. He's voting for the former Communists.

With cyclones and floods being an integral part of life in Bangladesh, and more particularly in the char areas, disaster management is an essential component of the programme. Developing hilly land on these sandbars is also part of the project.

The project is funded partly by the Stromme Memorial Foundation, Norway; and RDRS. Recently, after the 1998

floods, assistance came from ACT (Action by Churches Together) for post-flood rehabilitation in Kuriagram, especially in the char areas.

The most recent and tangible part of ACT's support for the project is construction of six permanent camp-cum-resource centres, four additional wireless sets that provide direct communication between remote chars and the mainland, a motorbike and a new engine for the speedboat. The speedboat went out of order during the 1998 floods.

The six camp-cum-resource centres are set up at Narayapur, Jhunkar, Begunganj, Shabeer Alga, Manushmara and Kodakata.

Says Abha Akhter, a development worker stationed at Manushmara, "I have been working with RDRS for 10 years, the past seven here at Manushmara. The present facilities have helped us to work enormously.

"There are six of us here, three men and women. Living on the char enables us to reach the people easily. Every morning we set out separately, visiting the groups. We're either conducting the credit programme, awareness building, skill training, advocacy training, a satellite antenatal clinic are all there; but, due to obvious reasons, more emphasis is put on disaster preparedness.

"Having the wireless sets installed has been a great blessing," points out Project Co-ordinator Nazrul Ghani. "In times of natural disaster, such as floods, we can easily communicate with the mainland and provide the authorities with relevant information, such as an outbreak of diarrhoea or any other emergency. During floods and cyclones, radio communication has proved to be a

saviour.

The radio communications is not used solely for RDRS programmes. There is a strong collaboration with the government as well. For example, in cases of emergencies such as an outbreak of diarrhoea, the civil surgeon of the district is informed and he takes steps accordingly. In case of any havoc, messages can be dispatched immediately from the radio set on the char to the one in the mainland office and vice versa.

The speedboat has also increased the efficiency of the programme. Carrying relief goods, medicines and other services to the chars is no longer time consuming. The usual delay brought about by tedious communication facilities such as country boats and other slow modes of river transport is not there anymore.

In other cases of extreme

emergency, such as an accident; a sickness requiring immediate attention; or, as in the case mentioned earlier, a difficult delivery case, the wireless comes in very handy and so does the speedboat.

These facilities have not only increased the efficiency of the RDRS staff and programme in the area, but have also made others more alert. They realise that with such modern modes of communication, any negligence on their parts will easily be detected.

Most importantly, to the people on these remote chars, the RDRS camp houses are symbols of security. These are havens of safety in times of disaster and distress.

"We are happy to have this camp here," says Farhad Ali, a local resident of Manushmara Char. "We welcome this project as it means development for the people and the char."

The radio communications is not used solely for RDRS programmes. There is a strong collaboration with the government as well. For example, in cases of emergencies such as an outbreak of diarrhoea, the civil surgeon of the district is informed and he takes steps accordingly. In case of any havoc, messages can be dispatched immediately from the radio set on the char to the one in the mainland office and vice versa.

The speedboat has also increased the efficiency of the programme. Carrying relief goods, medicines and other services to the chars is no longer time consuming. The usual delay brought about by tedious communication facilities such as country boats and other slow modes of river transport is not there anymore.

In other cases of extreme

emergency, such as an accident; a sickness requiring immediate attention; or, as in the case mentioned earlier, a difficult delivery case, the wireless comes in very handy and so does the speedboat.

These facilities have not only increased the efficiency of the RDRS staff and programme in the area, but have also made others more alert. They realise that with such modern modes of communication, any negligence on their parts will easily be detected.

Most importantly, to the people on these remote chars, the RDRS camp houses are symbols of security. These are havens of safety in times of disaster and distress.

"We are happy to have this camp here," says Farhad Ali, a local resident of Manushmara Char. "We welcome this project as it means development for the people and the char."

The radio communications is not used solely for RDRS programmes. There is a strong collaboration with the government as well. For example, in cases of emergencies such as an outbreak of diarrhoea, the civil surgeon of the district is informed and he takes steps accordingly. In case of any havoc, messages can be dispatched immediately from the radio set on the char to the one in the mainland office and vice versa.

The speedboat has also increased the efficiency of the programme. Carrying relief goods, medicines and other services to the chars is no longer time consuming. The usual delay brought about by tedious communication facilities such as country boats and other slow modes of river transport is not there anymore.

In other cases of extreme

emergency, such as an accident; a sickness requiring immediate attention; or, as in the case mentioned earlier, a difficult delivery case, the wireless comes in very handy and so does the speedboat.

These facilities have not only increased the efficiency of the RDRS staff and programme in the area, but have also made others more alert. They realise that with such modern modes of communication, any negligence on their parts will easily be detected.

Most importantly, to the people on these remote chars, the RDRS camp houses are symbols of security. These are havens of safety in times of disaster and distress.

"We are happy to have this camp here," says Farhad Ali, a local resident of Manushmara Char. "We welcome this project as it means development for the people and the char."

The radio communications is not used solely for RDRS programmes. There is a strong collaboration with the government as well. For example, in cases of emergencies such as an outbreak of diarrhoea, the civil surgeon of the district is informed and he takes steps accordingly. In case of any havoc, messages can be dispatched immediately from the radio set on the char to the one in the mainland office and vice versa.

The speedboat has also increased the efficiency of the programme. Carrying relief goods, medicines and other services to the chars is no longer time consuming. The usual delay brought about by tedious communication facilities such as country boats and other slow modes of river transport is not there anymore.

In other cases of extreme

emergency, such as an accident; a sickness requiring immediate attention; or, as in the case mentioned earlier, a difficult delivery case, the wireless comes in very handy and so does the speedboat.

These facilities have not only increased the efficiency of the RDRS staff and programme in the area, but have also made others more alert. They realise that with such modern modes of communication, any negligence on their parts will easily be detected.

Most importantly, to the people on these remote chars, the RDRS camp houses are symbols of security. These are havens of safety in times of disaster and distress.

"We are happy to have this camp here," says Farhad Ali, a local resident of Manushmara Char. "We welcome this project as it means development for the people and the char."

The radio communications is not used solely for RDRS programmes. There is a strong collaboration with the government as well. For example, in cases of emergencies such as an outbreak of diarrhoea, the civil surgeon of the district is informed and he takes steps accordingly. In case of any havoc, messages can be dispatched immediately from the radio set on the char to the one in the mainland office and vice versa.

The speedboat has also increased the efficiency of the programme. Carrying relief goods, medicines and other services to the chars is no longer time consuming. The usual delay brought about by tedious communication facilities such as country boats and other slow modes of river transport is not there anymore.

In other cases of extreme

emergency