

JAPAN

## Battle in Nagano intensifies

MONZURUL HUQ writes from Tokyo

THEY waited for almost two years for the arrival of a relatively favorable moment. And during that period they kept no stone unturned to block major decisions that a populist governor of a prefecture was taking with the intention of curbing the influence of bureaucracy and old-guard politicians whose sole interest lies on protecting their own influence.

As the two opposing forces are now getting ready for another round of a full fledged showdown, many in Japan's Nagano prefecture, the mountainous region famous for its ski resorts and natural beauty, are wondering if the choice they make in times of elections do have that much validity in the eyes of those who are elected. Yasuo Tanaka, a novelist turned politician took the helm of the prefecture administration in October 2000 riding the wave of popular discontent against the old-guard politicians. But like in everywhere, the old-guards in Japan too have their roots spread deep underneath the society and instead of disappearing from the scene totally they simply waited for the approach of an appropriate moment to move for their own counterattack.

The predominantly conservative Nagano prefecture assembly passed a no-confidence motion last Friday against the governor and by doing so, has drawn a new battle line where the next move is to come from the governor himself. The local assembly had the outspoken novelist in its sight right from the day he took office, but also had to show restraint in moving against the elected head of the administration as wind of changes started to blow all over the political circle of Japan after Junichiro Koizumi became country's prime minister.

But as the prime minister himself has by now been largely cornered and as his administration is fast losing its sharpness since the departure of the most outspoken member from the cabinet, the former foreign minister Makiko Tanaka, the old guards throughout Japanese political realm have once again started to come out in the limelight to as if to claim that their days have returned again. The Nagano incident is a stark reminder of that reality, which might soon have its fallout in national politics as well.

As already mentioned, the rift between the governor and the assembly in Nagano goes back to the days when the new governor took over the administration, although the immediate reason sighted for the no-confidence motion was the governor's announcement of a plan to cancel two dam projects. The motion sighted the decision of canceling the projects as a proof that the governor was not only self-righteous and dogmatic, but also lacking necessary capability to run the administration.

As an outspoken critic of public spending on construction projects that benefits only a selective business groups as well as influential politicians, it was expected that the new Nagano governor would take appropriate measures to stop such practices. And among those who were to suffer as a result of any such action was of course a group of local old guards who unfortunately still dominate the local assembly.

Tanaka also outraged the conventional political circle by dismissing the official in charge of civil engineering and replacing the head of the personnel division of the prefecture government. In addition to that, he started to scrutinize overseas trips made by assembly members at public expense. By doing so he wanted to ensure that they just

don't go abroad only for sight seeing. All these actions were enough to make him an enemy in the eyes of those who just saw him as an irritant in the way of their normal way of life. Moreover, his behavior also did not fit well with many of the ideas of the old timers.

Nagano governor continued to publish details of his personal life in a monthly magazine. Although this helped him to be in the media spotlight, the outright and casual confession about his relationship with women occasionally outraged many of those who are eager to see a more decent face of a politician they voted for. His opponents also don't forget to raise the issue of his vacation in Europe last July that he took with his girlfriend. And also towards the middle of last year Tanaka stirred another controversy when he suggested that his critics should go to live in another planet or to North Korea. But despite such out of the office attitudes that might not go well with a politician vying for popular support, the most important fallout in behavior that his critics failed to find out in Tanaka was that of charges of corruption.

In Japan where important political figures are seldom seen immune from the taint of corruption either financial or political, Yasuo Tanaka has proved himself to be a rare exception. This is the first time in Japan that a no confidence motion was put forward against an elected representative not on charges of corruption, but something as vague and unclear as proven incapability to run a public office. Hence the whole show has turned out to be politically tainted to the core.

Forty-eight assembly members of three political blocks, including the largest one known for its conservative position, submitted the motion against Tanaka. The 66-member assembly later passed the motion by 44-5 votes. The five members belonging to Japa-

nese Communist Party voted against the motion, while seven social democrat members and four others boycotted the vote.

Attention is now focused on how the embattled governor will face this challenge to fight back against his powerful opponents. There are three possible actions that he can now take, all of which would eventually lead to a fresh election to chose either a new governor or an assembly: he could dissolve the assembly, can call a gubernatorial election, or can do both. Most of the political observers now believe that Tanaka might go for a fresh gubernatorial election that would eventually see him returning to power with a new mandate. Despite barrage of accusations against the governor, the anti-Tanaka forces yet to find a credible challenger of their own who would be able to run successfully against a candidate having massive popular support.

Meanwhile, Tanaka himself has yet to decide which course of action he is going to take. He will have few more days to come into a definite conclusion. He remains defiant despite the no-confidence motion and insists that he would listen to the opinion of the people of his prefecture before deciding whether to dissolve the assembly or to give up his own post. Dissolving the assembly might not be a viable option for a politician without having direct support of any of the country's established political parties. Hence, a new election in Nagano might witness Tanaka returning to the office for a second time to face his old adversaries. That might take the political battle back to square one. But there is also the possibility that by the time the national politics of Japan too might see the emergence of at least some new trends with the potentiality of having a significant long-term impact.

CHINA

## A problem to solve?

PHILIP BOWRING, International Herald Tribune

FOR the United States, the North Korean regime makes a credible member of George W. Bush's pantheon of evil. For South Korea, the North is a source of endless frustration and occasional danger. For Japan, Pyongyang's missiles are crude reminders of the holes in its self-defense capability.

But North Korea is now a bigger a problem for its last remaining friend, China, than for its foes. Irritation with Pyongyang is not yet official, but in private, and in the popular mind, there is contempt along with occasional flashes of anger at its stubborn refusal to learn from China and change its ways.

What can China do about this prickly and recalcitrant regime which combines an extreme version of Korean nationalism with a Communist elite's ruthless commitment to its own survival? Recent incidents have underlined how much of a liability Pyongyang has become. North Korean asylum seekers in Beijing have repeatedly embarrassed China, and despite the huge increase in security around embassies in Beijing such events are certain to recur. China has cracked down on South Korean and foreign church groups encouraging asylum-seeking through China, but the pressure will not go away.

China has also been forced to tighten security along the border with the North, but knows that it cannot be sealed. Indeed, the porous border is to the advantage of the North, which is content to export its problems of feeding and clothing its population.

China conspicuously failed to

take sides over the recent North-South naval clash. It saw this for what it was - a diversion from the South's moment of triumph in hosting and reaching the semifinal of the World Cup. This incident was never going to lead to a wider war, but it reminded China of the potential vulnerability of its Beijing Olympics events on the nearby peninsula.

More immediately, the clash offered a new threat to the South's "sunshine" policy, which Beijing has been at pains to encourage. It could lead to victory for the conservative Grand National Party in the presidential election in December and a shift by Seoul toward the United States, with which relations have been uncomfortable since Bush came to office.

Beijing is also concerned that lack of reform in the North could eventually lead to the collapse of the regime and a German-style instant reunification, whether the South wants it or not. China is wary of Korean reunification, especially at a time when U.S. troops are still in the South. Even if U.S. troops were then withdrawn and Korea came more within China's sphere of influence than that of America or Japan, China would have worries about the integrity of its own frontiers, given the number of ethnic Koreans, with their fierce sense of identity, on its side of the border.

China has continued to support the North with food, fuel and fertilizer to help keep the regime afloat and avoid any sudden and disruptive change. It has used its relationship with Pyongyang very effectively on the diplomatic front, wringing concessions from Washington on other issues in return for help, real or imagined, in pressing the

North on nuclear and missile questions.

But China has had scant success in persuading the North to change its domestic policies. Beijing has access to the leadership - which is more than anyone else has - but little influence. Last year Kim Jong Il visited China's showcases of economic reform, Shenzhen and Shanghai. He was surely impressed. But for survivalists like Kim, real change is dangerous.

So is there anything China can do? Should it take some risks and threaten withdrawal of economic support if there is not economic reform and a serious response to the South's sunshine policy? Are there factions within army and party in the North which it can back in an effort to spur change? Or is domestic politics in the North too obscure, or nationalism so strong that any Chinese attempts to meddle would backfire?

For now China is preoccupied with its own party congress and new leadership. There is policy inertia in China itself. Many in the party and the army would regard any attempt to force change or cut the North Koreans adrift as strategically dangerous. For them the present situation is uncomfortable, but tolerably so.

However, even conservatives recognize that China's support for its bizarre Communist friend and neighbor fits ill with the expansion of China's influence in a prospering, trade-oriented East Asia. The rest of us should stop worrying about Pyongyang. Its weaponry is as overblown as its rhetoric. North Korea is a nettle that China has to grasp.

THAILAND

## Traumatised in Taiwan

POONA ANTASEEDA

"I miss my home, I wanna go home. I don't want to work here in this hellish factory anymore!" Rinna Kamwongsa, an electronics worker in a factory in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, told her mother during a long distance call in a voice full of sadness which ended in anger. Her homesickness makes the graduate of Rajabhat Institute call Thailand every pay day, the 10th of each month.

Graduating from the Institute about two years ago into a dismal job market, her aspirations were higher than to be on the staff at a convenience store. A friend told her that many people from her village and from other provinces were making a lot of money working in Taiwan in the electronics industry. Hoping to get 20-30,000 baht a month the young woman from Ban

Thon, Tha Bo, Nong Khai, contacted Krungthep Tawee Co., Ltd. Nong Khai branch, about working in a factory in Kao Song.

Her family came up with the 220,000 baht commission fee asked for by Krungthep Tawee by mortgaging the land title deeds to their rice field and house to a bank.

"The contract promised that she would receive 15,840 NT (about 20,592 baht, 1NT = 1.3 baht ) a month in regular income, and up to 30,000 baht with overtime," said Rinna's mother, Nom Kamwongsa. "It was only in the first three months that she got 20,500 baht a month. Later the factory deducted from her salary for food, dormitory and other expenses, so she got only 10,000 - 12,000 baht a month."

They had assumed her housing and food would be provided for, as has been the practice in the past.

Things worsened after the Sep-

tember 11 attacks because the factory's exports to the United States fell off.

"Now my daughter gets only 9,000-10,000 baht a month," complained Nom. Rinna's father, Pheng Kamwongsa, said: "Beside the 220,000 baht commission fee, we are out almost 20,000 baht for other expenditures which were necessary for her to go to Taiwan."

The couple went to make a complaint with the Provincial Employment Office in Nong Khai.

"The officials there said Krungthep Tawee was not registered as a job placement agency. They advised us to accept the situation for now. They said if we take the matter too seriously they are afraid that our daughter will be sent back before the end of the contract," Pheng added.

"They asked us, why didn't we complain earlier? We thought the



What with high commission fees, lower-than-expected wages, and food, dormitory and other salary deductions, Thai workers are losing everything but their smiles.

job broker was registered. There are many people here who have applied with the firm. Now, we can do nothing but tell our daughter to endure," he said bitterly. Although Rinna's income is not what was promised, it is still needed to pay off the bank. The loan taken out to pay Rinna's commission fee now has 60,000 baht unpaid. Whatever she has sent home from her salary, Pheng has used to repay the bank. Her two-year employment contract will end by November and can be continued. But her father says: "I won't allow her to continue the contract. By November I think she will be able to pay back all of the loan."

### Respectable Veneer

Krungthep Tawee has now closed its Nong Khai branch, formerly located opposite the Big Jiang department store less than a kilometre away from the Nong Khai Provincial Employment Office.

After the branch was closed, Naris Enterprise, which is believed to be controlled by a former permanent secretary to the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, moved into the office space.

"Actually, there are many companies involved in the overseas job market that are not job placement firms, they are loan providing firms," said a labour official.

He said that the function of the firms is to provide loans to job seekers or to help them get loans from banks. The workers then use the loans to pay commission fees to job placement services. But if there are no overseas jobs, the companies will have no customers.

"So some of these loan-providing companies might believe they have to offer a full-scale service, both providing loans and finding jobs overseas. If they do offer the full-scale service, they become illegal job brokers, because they are not registered to do so," he added.

The officials admit that they can do nothing against such practices because of a lack of evidence.

"They open a room or set up a desk next door for workers to apply, and they take workers for medical checks, passport request and loan processing. But we have no evidence to file against them except the records on the loan borrowing. Anyway, making loans is a legal activity and these firms are registered with the Department of Commercial Registration," he said.

Taking legal action with these firms is difficult because it needs cooperation from workers and documentation.

### Workers beware

An unidentified official at the Divi-

sion of Inspection and Job Seekers (DIJS), the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW), also insisted that Krungthep Tawee, Naris Enterprise and other similar businesses are not job placement firms. They help customers of job placement firms or sub-contractors in taking out loans from their agency or from banks and financial institutions. The job placement firms, or sub-contractors, can then legally charge a broker's fee of 3-5,000 baht for each worker.

"Legally, neither Krungthep Tawee nor Naris can provide jobs overseas. We (the DIJS and MLSW) don't have profiles of the two companies because they're not authorised to provide jobs and we have never had any complaints about the two," said the official.

"If a worker wants to complain, they must have documents, and witnesses," he said, when asked about Rinna's case. But monitoring of the firms can be done only by court order, he added. According to Article 30 of the Labour Protection and Employment Act, any person or firm providing jobs overseas without legal authority is liable to 3-10 years imprisonment, a 60,000 - 200,000 baht fine or both.

The official argued that workers should look carefully at what they are getting into. The terms of any contracts they are asked to sign must be considered before it can be shown whether or not the worker is being cheated.

"Workers must look at their contract, and not believe their brokers. If the contract says they will get a certain amount every month, they must check carefully to see what will be deducted from their salary."

SO HOW can a poor, fated, maybe not so careful, worker like Rinna get justice?

The official candidly admitted that it is unlikely that the actions of some such companies have escaped the notice of those who should be monitoring them. He added that the Ministry's lacking profiles on them because they are not registered as job placement firms is a Catch-22 which allows companies to send workers overseas illegally without workers' complaints being recorded. No one can track illegal operations, or whether they are done by provincial branches or head offices. Moreover, taking legal action against these companies needs both documents and witnesses. The procedures may be too complicated, as well as expensive and time-consuming, for workers to handle.

Courtesy: Bangkok Post