

Mr Wang Peian, Vice Minister of the National Health and Family Planning Commission Answers the Reporters' Questions on China's Fertility Policy Improvement

Reporter: The Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee adopted the "Decision on Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening Reforms", which states that China will start implementing a two-child policy for the couple where either the husband or the wife is from a single child family. This policy has aroused wide public attention. Why the policy is introduced at this time?

Wang: Since the beginning of this century, great changes have taken place in the population situation of our country. While the basic condition of having a huge size of population remains unchanged, problems with the structure of population have emerged and increasingly become important factors affecting economic and social development in our country.

Firstly, the low fertility level in China has been kept steady with a trend of slight decline. China's total fertility rate dropped to below replacement level in the early 1990s and currently stands at 1.5 to 1.6, which is comparable to the average level in the developed countries. While the total number of population still keeps growing, the momentum has tended to become weaker. If the current fertility policy is kept unchanged, the total fertility rate will continue to decline, which will result in rapid decline in the total number of population after it has reached its peak, effecting negative impacts on the long-term balanced population development and the long-term development of the nation.

Secondly, problems with population structure have become more prominent. A decline in the number of working-age population has been observed. In 2012, the number of working-age population decreased by 3.45 million comparing to the number for the year before. After 2030, the number of working-age population will decline at an annual average of 8 million. Meanwhile, population ageing will accelerate. By the end of 2013, the number of people aged 60 and over will reach 200 million and will continue to grow to 400 million by the mid of this century. Its proportion will increase to one in four people of the total population from the current level of one in seven people. The sex ratio at birth, which has been fluctuating at a high level for the last 20 years, still stands at a level higher than normal. In 2012, it was as high as 117.7.

Thirdly, the size of family has been reducing. The sixth national census registered a average family size of 3.1 persons, which was 0.34 fewer than the number reported by the fifth national census. Comparing to 4.43 persons per family on average in the early 1980s, it represents a reduction of 1.33 persons. The number of single child families has surpassed 150 million and the proportion of elderly people living by

themselves has increased, which is a sign of weakening in the traditional functions of families.

Fourthly, changes have taken place in childbearing desire of the people. With economic and social development and improvements in people's living conditions, a new childbearing concept featuring "having fewer but healthier births and providing the children with better care and education" is in the process of being formed.

In "An Open Letter to All Communist Party Members and Communist Youth League Members on Control of Population Growth of our Country" by the CPC Central Committee issued in 1980, it stated: "In 30 years, when the current extremely tense population situation is alleviated, a different population policy can be adopted." At present, the conditions are appropriate and the time is favorable for adopting the two-child fertility policy for couples where either the husband or the wife is from a single child family.

Reporter: What is the significance of implementing this policy?

Wang: The implementation of this fertility policy represents a major adjustment and improvement of the family planning policy. It is an important act that accords with the fresh conditions of population development and accommodates the will of the people. Its significance can be summarized in short by three "favorable".

The first is that it is favorable for maintaining a rational size of labor force, slowing down the process of population ageing, boosting sustained and healthy economic development and creating a sound population environment for the realization of the China dream of rejuvenation of the great Chinese nation. The second is that it is favorable for achieving an integration of the state policy and the will of the people, increasing the ability of families in resisting risks, strengthening the function of families in taking care of the aged and promoting family happiness and social harmony. The third is that it is favorable for stabilizing the fertility at a moderately low level, promoting long-term balanced population development and enhancing coordinated and sustainable development between population and economy, society, resources and the environment.

Reporter: Can you brief us what preparations you had done before the policy was announced?

Wang: At the instructions from Central Government, our commission started preparatory work for fertility policy adjustment and improvement since 2008, through in-depth investigation and argumentation. Through the conduct of the final assessment on the Population Development Plan for the 11th Five-Year Period, the "Fertility Survey in 1000 Administrative Villages", the "Survey on Marital Status of People from Single-Child Families in 150 Counties", a nation-wide verification on

basic population data of children aged 0-9, and activities of comparison and cross-examination using data from education, public security and statistical departments, we were able to obtain a relatively objective and precise judgment and estimation on the total number and structure of the population, fertility status and trends of population changes. At the same time, studies on a series of subjects were organized and calculations and comparisons on multiple scenarios were conducted. The outcomes of these studies were sent to various departments and organizations for comments and suggestions. Gradually the idea and framework of this new fertility policy was formed as a result of repetitive discussions and argumentation.

The CPC Central Committee gave high attention to this activity. The leaders of the CPC Central Committee listened to reports and gave explicit instructions on this specific subject for several times. Since the time after the “two conferences” this year, we went deeper in relative research and verification and further collected opinions from concerned departments, organizations and various local governments, according to requirements by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council. After comprehensive considerations, the CPC Central Committee finally made the decision to implement the two-child policy for the couples where either the husband or the wife is from a single child family.

Reporter: Can you brief us what specific population groups to which the new policy is applicable?

Wang: the policy is applicable to the couples where either the husband or the wife is from a single child family. Generally speaking, single child refers to a person who does not have brothers or sisters or half-blood brothers or sisters.

Reporter: How the new policy will start to be implemented?

Wang: Article 18 of the “Population and Family Planning Law” stipulates: “The State maintains its current policy for reproduction, encouraging late marriage and late childbearing and advocating one child per couple. Where the requirements specified by laws and regulations are met, plans for a second child, if requested, may be made. Specific measures in this regard shall be formulated by the people’s congress or its standing committee of a province, autonomous region, or municipality directly under the Central Government.” According to this stipulation, local governments at various places have formulated Population and Family Planning Regulations for their own administrative areas, in which specific rules for having more than one child are provided. For implementation of the two-child policy for the couple where either the husband or the wife is from a single child family, amendments shall be made where it is necessary in the local Population and Family Planning Regulations by provincial level people’s congresses or their standing committees in accordance with the national Population and Family Planning Law, and be implemented according to law. Our

Commission will do its best to conduct assessment, guidance and supervision on implementation of the policy at local levels.

Reporter: Is there a unified timetable for the implementation of the policy?

Wang: There will be no unified timetable for implementation of the policy in the country. All provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities) will decide on their own time arrangements according their specific conditions. However, the time lag between various places should not be a too long.

Reporter: If I am eligible for a second child according to the policy, when can I start applying for it?

Wang: You can submit your application according to procedure as soon as the provincial level administrative region where your household registration is belonged to has amended its provincial Population and Family Planning Regulations or its people's congress has adopted special regulation that couple where either the husband or the wife is from a single child family is able to have two children. If the household registrations of a couple belong to two different provinces (autonomous regions or municipalities), the couple can make the application at any of the two places where couple is able to have second child as a result of implementing this policy.

Reporter: Will the implementation of this policy spur eligible couples to give birth to a second child in a short period, which will lead to a sharp population increase in a short time period?

Wang: Nation-widely, the number of couples that will be eligible for two children by implementing this policy is not very big and each province (autonomous region, municipality) will decide by itself when it will start implementing this policy. As the gaps exist among various places in conditions of population development and performance of family planning programme, each place is at a different stage of preparation for implementing this policy, which will result in a time lag in the starting point of implementation. Therefore, I do not think there will be a sharp population increase in the short run.

However, places where there is a big group of eligible couples for this policy must take precautions to avoid this problem. These places can take measures like advocating for reasonable birth spacing, giving priority to couples in elder ages to have a second child and do a better job in managing second child application, in order to prevent concentrated childbearing in a short time period. The central government will formulate annual population plans in accordance with the National Population Development Plan for the 12th Five-Year Plan Period and taking into consideration of population changes in the recent years and impacts of the two-child fertility policy,

and strengthen efforts of guidance and regulation to ensure that the number of births is kept within a reasonable range and avoid huge fluctuations.

Reporter: Will the implementation of this policy bring about big pressure on our country's food security and provision of public services of healthcare, education and employment?

Wang: The current plans and resources allocation for food security and provision of public services are all based on the assumption that the population will grow to 1.43 billion by the end of 2020 and will reach its peak value at close to 1.5 billion around 2033. According to projections, after the adjustment in policy, the annual population growth rate will not see marked increases, the total number of population by 2020 will be substantially fewer than 1.43 billion and the population will peak at a figure much lower than 1.5 billion. Besides, although the number of births will see some increases in the few years after implementation of this policy, it will amount only to the number of births around the year 2000. We therefore are confident that the implementation of this policy will not bring about big pressure on food security and public services of healthcare, education and employment.

Reporter: Why can't China adopt a two-child policy for all couples?

Wang: Our Commission has conducted quite number of researches and argumentation on the subject, which all concluded that if a two-child policy for all couples is implemented now, it will cause big fluctuations in the number of births and serious concentration of childbearing which will bring about big pressures on the provision of various public services. In the long run, it will create periodical fluctuations in number of births, result in continued growth in total number of population, delay the arrival of population peak value, negatively affect the realization of long-term population development plan and cause unfavorable impacts on the country's economic and social development. Independent studies conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the China Development Research Foundation and the School of Sociology and Population Studies of Renmin University of China all came up with the same conclusion.

Reporter: Regarding the adjustment and improvement of the fertility policy, there is an opinion in society which states that the family planning work is going to be slackened. Is this true?

Wang: The adjustment and improvement of fertility policy does not mean that we are going to slacken the family planning work. At present, the basic national condition of having a huge size of population has not been changed and the pressure on economy, society, resources and the environment as a result of having a huge size of population will exist for many years to come. Family planning, as a basic national policy, shall be maintained on a long-term basis and the work of family planning shall be carried out

on a continuous basis without any slackening. We will continue to implement the Population and Family Planning Law, local level population and family planning regulations and other relative laws and regulations. Those who practice family planning conscientiously will be awarded and supported and those who violate the laws to have more children will be treated according to laws and disciplines.