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**An Inconvenient Dissident: Forced Sterilizations and the New York Times**

by Douglas A. Sylva

Liberals have been talking a great deal these days about inconvenient truths, so here are about a billion for them to ponder: the Chinese people and their plight under the state's draconian birth control laws. These laws have always been something of a guilty pleasure for liberals, especially environmentalists. For if the earth really does hang in the balance, and if it dangles there so precariously because of human activity, and if all of those active humans, with all of those nasty activities like eating and reproducing and curing diseases, refuse to reduce their own numbers, well, then, perhaps a forced reduction is in order.

And so, in 1979, when the Chinese government decreed that all couples would need state approval to marry, and state approval to give birth, and that healthy couples would be allowed only one child (and "unfit" couples none), many in the West silently cheered. Or, in the case of the United Nations and its official population control agency, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), not so silently. In fact, the United Nations was so enthusiastic that it quickly established a UN Population Award - a kind of Nobel Prize for population control - just in order to give the very first one to the communist government of China.

All of this is brought to mind by one Chen Guangcheng, the inconvenient dissident. At one time, Chen seemed a perfect model of a modern major activist. As the New York Times recently described him: "He lost his sight after a childhood illness and did not attend school until he was 18....Determined to realize his legal rights, he studied law on his own, recruiting his four older brothers to read legal texts to him. In 1994 he went to Beijing to protest violations of laws protecting the handicapped. While there, he took action against the Beijing subway authority because attendants would not let him ride free....Rakishly handsome in his dark glasses, he became a popular legal crusader. He handled cases against the local sanitation bureau, the police and the bureau of commerce. A paper factory that spewed noxious waste into a river near his home was forced to suspend operations, making him a local hero."

Wow! A "rakishly handsome" Chuck Schumer, who may even know how to stir-fry! That's enough to make an Upper West Side girl swoon. Until, that is, Chen started to investigate forced abortions and sterilizations. He was subsequently beaten, kept under house arrest for over a year, and now stands trial for such heinous crimes as "destroying property and blocking traffic." The Times does not know quite what to make of all of this, or of the coercion that he uncovered: "So when residents of his home village of Dongshigu were ensnared in a coercive birth control campaign last spring that appeared to be violate national laws, they turned to Mr. Chen. Officials in the city of Linyi, which has a population of more than 10 million and contains Dongshigu, forced thousands of residents to undergo abortions or sterilizations, according to people supporting Mr. Chen who cited local documents to support their claims. Such tactics, common in the early days of China's strict population control policies 25 years ago, are now illegal. The law says the authorities can levy fines only against people who exceed birth quotas. But forceful measures remain pervasive, because failure to reach population control targets can end an official's prospects for promotion."

Notice the Times' discomfort with the whole issue, manifest in the muddy prose used to describe the current legal situation. Coercion was common in the beginning of the birth control laws (which implies that it is no longer so), but it "remains pervasive." Coercion is illegal, but apparently tolerated.

Notice, also, what is not there, the obvious questions a journalist should ask when faced with such ambiguities: is coercion more widespread than in Chen's corner of China. And if the

answer is yes (which apparently it is), does that mean the national government turns a blind eye to such practices? And what about the fines imposed upon “people who exceed birth quotas”? Aren't such fines, which often equal many years of income, coercive, as well? And are the national laws mere propaganda for Western consumption, a kind of human rights version of a Potemkin village? Finally, noting China's longstanding collaboration with the UN Population Fund, what role has this agency had in such coercion? At the very least, the New York Times should have asked if UNFPA operates in the same area where Chen documented the forced abortions and sterilizations.

The New York Times investigated none of this, since it is a staunch proponent of the reproductive rights agenda in general (and therefore is reluctant to besmirch any abortions), and the UN Population Fund in particular. In fact, according to the Times, the Bush administration is “anti-woman” for cutting US money to UNFPA in an effort to get the agency to pay attention to forced abortions in China.

In its own reporting on the Chen case, The Los Angeles Times showed considerably more honesty. While the New York Times said that the coercion uncovered by Chen “was at least initially taken seriously in Beijing,” the Los Angeles Times stated bluntly that “villagers suspect a whitewash” from Beijing. The Los Angeles Times did not allow the central government to evade responsibility by blaming local officials: “But Beijing, which says the policy has prevented about 400 million births since its introduction in 1979, continues to pressure local areas on overall targets, spurring abuses.” And the Los Angeles Times placed a national official on record as saying that the current program, which is so conducive to coercive tactics, will remain the law of the entire nation: “The current family-planning policy must be kept basically stable, a fundamental measure to cope with the fourth baby boom in the next five years.”

And, perhaps most importantly, the Los Angeles Times told some of the victims' stories (something the New York Times simply refused to do): “When women fled to avoid losing their babies, lawyers and residents say, officials seized their parents, nephews or cousins as leverage, hoping to force the women to return....A woman who would only give her family name as Wang said one of her husband's relatives had two girls and got pregnant last year in hopes of having a boy. When family-planning officials couldn't track her down, they detained Wang and her husband, Xia Jingshan. Wang said that she was released quickly but that her husband was kept for almost a week. 'They beat him with a leather stick until he couldn't breathe,' she said. 'He was beaten so hard he could barely walk, but the officials propped him up and forced him to go looking for his relatives anyway.' Fearful that Xia would be beaten to death, the pregnant relative returned and submitted to the abortion, even though she was eight months pregnant, Wang said. 'It was a baby boy, and his hair was already very dark,' Wang said. 'The couple was so sad.'”

Sooner or later, Chen will go on trial, and he may be a political prisoner for years to come. And this coercion, the forced abortions and sterilizations on a vast scale, will continue. But don't expect the New York Times and its friends at UNFPA to dig too deep, or care too much.