

Editorial

"Be good hosts and welcome the World Women's Conference." That is China's newest slogan flashed on the front page of the *People's Daily*. The editorial continues, "We will greet our sisters and friends from around the world with our new attitudes, achievements and atmosphere in building socialism with Chinese characteristics." Obviously, when Foreign Minister Qian Qichen invited the UN to hold its Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, in 1991, he was reflecting the will of the government to use the Conference as a showcase for China's achievements. He also signalled that Beijing was ready to welcome and undertake this kind of enterprise.

The United Nations Fourth Women's Conference, scheduled for September 4 to 15 and its non-government parallel organization, the NGO, scheduled for August 30 to September 9, constitute the largest international event ever to take place so far in China. It is also giving China, the UN and the NGO's very bad headaches. China is running into almost insurmountable logistical problems and ideological challenges. The UN groups admit they have experienced high levels of frustration.

A great deal of interest was generated in the conference, not only because of its subject matter--actions aiming at equality, development and peace along with the usual topics of health, education and employment--but because the conference was actually taking place in Beijing. China may always have known that about 180 UN member countries were expected to attend the congress but, as the Chinese organizing committee secretary general, Wan Siquan, remarked, "the number of applications exceeded our expectations..." China was not, nor is it now, ready to host some 40,000 delegates. It was soon clear that facilities were inadequate. The atmosphere was not quite right either and the attitude needed by the host country to tolerate the many divergent views likely to be expressed at such a gathering was sadly lacking.

In April, China shifted the site of the NGO Forum from the original venue, the Workers' Stadium in central Beijing, to Huairou, about one hour's drive or 60 kilometers away. The

reason given for the change was that the original venue was "structurally unsound." This reason did not satisfy certain women's groups who claimed that Beijing wanted the obstreperous NGO activists away from the city. During a confrontation in June, the NGO representatives, in a take it or leave it option, agreed to hold the Forum in the dusty farm town of Huairou in what is so far a half-finished building with a roof and no walls. Some sessions will be held in tents. According to Huang Qizao, when all these makeshift arrangements are in place, there will still be only 160 meeting rooms with a capacity of 10,000 places at any one time. That leaves some 25,000 delegates out somewhere. The somewhere seems to be a visit to the Great Wall and a shopping spree! "We hope those people who cannot participate in the meetings will take our buses to tourist sites and recreation centres," said Mr. Wan, the committee's deputy secretary.

The change in venue was not the only clue that everyone would not be welcome at the Forum. For political and religious reasons, visas have already been denied some 500 groups including some from Tibet, Taiwan and Iran. Other visa seekers may also be left out in the cold. NGO delegates must have hotel confirmation slips in hand--and part payment made--before they can apply for visas at the Chinese Consulates in their countries. The Chinese Organizing Committee said 33,000 confirmations were mailed in late July. Given the postal situation in many countries, it is almost certain that thousands of delegates will not be boarding their plane to Beijing as they had planned.

Does China really think that it can substitute a bus ride to the Great Wall and shopping in Beijing for attendance at the Conference? Would it not have been better for China "to save face" and ask for the Conference to be moved elsewhere until it can get its act together? Perhaps we can also ask: Is it really suitable to hold a conference on women's rights in a country that forces abortion on its women, that looks the other way when it comes to girl infanticide and sells its girl babies for exorbitant sums of money to Westerners who want to adopt children? Why did the UN capitulate so easily to Beijing's arrangements?

Hopefully, for the thousands who are sincere about improving women's rights, and who will be leaving large sums of money behind in Beijing, the Conference will still prove a success--in spite of everything! (BAM)