

Hong Kong's next leader to ban mainland babies

April 17 2012, by Beh Lih Yi

Hong Kong's next leader said Tuesday he plans to ban pregnant mainlanders from giving birth in the city and deny their children residency rights, in a bid to ease pressure on local hospitals.

The southern Chinese city has been struggling to cope with tens of thousands of mainland Chinese women who arrive yearly to give birth, thereby gaining residency rights for their children and dodging China's one-child policy.

Mainlanders accounted for nearly half of Hong Kong's 88,000 births in 2010, prompting an outcry over shortages of places in maternity wards and the soaring cost of childbirth in the former British colony of seven million people.

Incoming chief executive Leung Chun-ying said he would ban pregnant mainlanders whose husbands were not from Hong Kong, dubbed "double negatives", from giving birth in local hospitals next year.

"I hope the 'double negative' pregnant mainland Chinese women understand this message," Leung told public broadcaster RTHK less than a month after he was chosen to succeed outgoing Chief Executive Donald Tsang.

"If they have registered and prepared to give birth here next year, it is very likely that their child will not be entitled to the residency rights."

Leung, a wealthy former property consultant, will assume responsibility for running the semi-autonomous city on July 1 after winning the backing of a pro-Beijing electoral committee last month.

Leung's remarks prompted a mixed response from activists and medical practitioners, with campaigners who have taken to the streets to protest at the influx of mainland women lauding his plan.

Christine Chan, spokeswoman of a Facebook campaign set up to protest against mainland mothers, applauded Leung's tough stance.

"We need to send out a very clear message," she told AFP.

"They have put an unprecedented strain on our medical and education resources, and push up prices of baby products like baby formula. I think it's high time for us to deal with this issue."

But doctors warned the government against rushing into a decision that could have disastrous financial consequences for hospitals, many of which have expanded obstetrics services to meet the inflated demand.

"It should not be an abrupt U-turn. If we have three years (before a complete ban), we can have time to plan," Private Hospital Association chairman Alan Lau told RTHK radio.

Responding to public pressure, the government set a quota of 31,000 mainland mothers in private hospitals this year and 3,400 at state hospitals.

The health department is set to announce the new quota for 2013 by the end of the month.

The city has clamped down on agents who arrange birthing trips for

mainland mothers to Hong Kong, and raided unlicensed hostels where the women stay.

Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule in 1997 under a system which guarantees rights and freedoms not enjoyed in the mainland.

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