

A gloomy forecast of our economic future

Hongkong's economy is shakier than people think, and the Colony will be the first place to sink, along with Japan, as the world-wide economic situation worsens, according to world-famous population biologist and ecologist, Dr Paul Ehrlich.

Dr Ehrlich, who is professor of Biology at Stanford University, California, and author of the controversial book, "The Population Bomb," is in Hongkong as the guest of the University of Hongkong and the Hongkong Family Planning Association.

At a press conference yesterday, he was very critical of the Colony's ecological situation and painted a gloomy picture of its economic future.

"The idea pervading Hongkong that the present situation, with raw materials flowing in and manufactured goods finding a ready market,

will continue, is a very short-sighted one," he warned.

"There has been a rapid reshuffle of ideas throughout the world, particularly among the leaders of the undeveloped countries, who are now holding on to their natural resources and raising the prices of those resources."

Dr Ehrlich also predicted that markets for Hongkong's manufactured goods will become much more restricted as governments introduce protectionism against imports.

In his view it is imperative that the Government should move as rapidly as possible to reduce the Colony's dependence on foreign resources.

"It is impossible for Hongkong to become completely independent — it does not have the resource base to do that. But it is

preposterous to increase its dependence and this will happen if the population continues to grow," he said.

Dr Ehrlich was sceptical of claims that the Hongkong birth-rate of 19.6 per thousand was a reasonable one.

"Compared with most Asian countries — yes it's good," he said. "But Hongkong is a special situation. It is certainly not an undeveloped country. And being as crowded as it is, any growth rate is bad."

But the Hongkong Government was not the only one to come under fire from Prof Ehrlich yesterday.

He roundly abused governments throughout the world, accusing world leaders of being "men from the last century", and "living in a fairyland".

Referring to the current world population problem and the resultant food shortages, he

said most governments have not the vaguest notion what is going on.

"Fifteen years ago, there were two solutions to the problem — a decrease in the birth-rate or an increase in the death-rate," he said.

"But nothing was done and now, as a result of crop failures throughout the world, we are seeing the beginning of the death-rate solution."

Dr Ehrlich said good crop seasons might buy a 10 to 15 year reprieve, but he doubts whether even then it would be used to advantage.

In fact, he is so doubtful he has written a book, to be released shortly, entitled "Don't Count On It Happening," outlining ways in which people can get away from it all.

Dr Ehrlich's visit to Hongkong is the last leg of a tour which also included

Australia and New Zealand. He and his wife, Anne, have been carrying out a research programme — and collecting butterflies they use in their studies of population dynamics.

Dr Ehrlich yesterday described the United Nations Bucharest Conference on World Population as "a predictable farce".

He refused to attend after taking part in a preliminary conference at which he felt it became clear the fundamental ecological and resource problems of the world would not even be considered.

"My wife and I told the preliminary conference that 1974 was likely to see great famines, and they laughed at the idea. Now the famines are here, and politicians and religious leaders apparently are just going to let them get worse," he said.