

400,000 face residency rights loss

By M Y Sung and Michael Smith

THE government fears up to 400,000 ethnic Chinese Hongkong citizens who have migrated overseas will be denied the right to live in the territory after 1997.

But Hongkong's population is predicted to swell by more than 500,000, with thousands of mainland Chinese expected to obtain permanent residency after 1997.

The startling figures were released yesterday, and highlight official concern about the status of hundreds of thousands of Hongkong residents under Chinese rule.

Government figures also revealed up to 20,000 non-Chinese ethnics — mainly Indian and Pakistani — holding British Dependent Territories Citizen (BDTC) passports would also be denied the right to live here under the Basic Law.

Principal Assistant Secretary for Security Simon Vickers said yesterday that mainland citizens with family ties in Hongkong would benefit under the Basic Law by obtaining permanent residency status after 1997.

Under the Basic Law, people who had a parent with Hongkong permanent residency status at the time of their birth

would automatically gain the right to live in Hongkong on 1 July 1997, Vickers said.

A Hongkong government proposal to align the present Immigration Ordinance with the Basic Law has been put to the Chinese side for further discussion.

The government estimated about 100,000 children would directly benefit from the new legislation, but it would not introduce automatic family reunion measures because of public pressure.

The government believed thousands of mainland wives of Hongkong men would be allowed into the territory under Chinese rule.

"The Chinese government has already put a priority on bringing wives across the border for the purpose of family reunions," Vickers said.

Immigration Department Assistant Director Cheung Kwok-shum predicted 300,000 to 400,000 split-family members would be allowed to permanently live in Hongkong by 1997, with most of them being mainland wives of Hongkong men.

But the government also estimated that 400,000 local citizens would lose their permanent residency status under the Basic Law, if they acquired foreign nationality.

They would mainly include Chinese nationals living overseas who obtained foreign citizenship, even if they retained their BDTC passports.

Hongkong people who emigrated to Canada, Australia, the United States and possibly those who qualified under the British Nationality Scheme would be affected.

Article 24 of the Basic Law says Chinese citizens who have been permanent residents in Hongkong for a continuous period of at least seven years are classified as "permanent residents".

Non-Chinese could also be classified as permanent residents if they entered Hongkong with valid travel document and lived here permanently.

Legislators say the situation is still unclear and have demanded assurances about the right of abode for Chinese citizens and foreign nationals after 1997.

The government's projections were based on Immigration Department figures and the number of applications from mainland wives seeking permanent residency in Hongkong.

Britain is pursuing the issue with China in the Joint Liaison Group, but Vickers said negotiations on the issue were proceeding at a slow pace.