

Midland Daily News

Former Mongolian leader learns here

BY STUART FROHM
of the Daily News

A herdsman's son who was Mongolia's prime minister learned more about think tanks during a brief stay in Midland.

"Poverty is a big problem," Elbegdorj Tsakhia, a writer, said of his largely agricultural homeland. It has 30 million cattle and 2 1/2 million people. And it is sandwiched between China and Russia.

For some of his countrymen, "It's very difficult to live in a free society," after having all decisions made by "the bosses," he said.

"I'm trying to persuade people that government is a bad thing." Not all government, but "excessive government intervention in people's lives," he explained. "Free people can create wonderful things."

Elbegdorj hopes to help establish civic organizations and perhaps a research and education institute, also known as a think tank. He plans to return in July to his homeland, where he's been honored for helping to bring democracy.

Thursday night through Saturday night, he was in downtown Midland attending the 12th leadership conference of The Mackinac Center for Public Policy. That think tank has a free market perspective.

The conference is for Americans and others who run a think tank, work for one or want to start one.

Also attending were nine Americans and Melissa Davis of the Institute of Economic Affairs in London, and Bernhard Ruetz of the Liberales Institut in Zurich, Switzerland.

Perhaps Elbegdorj will be prime minister again, said

Mackinac Center President Lawrence W. Reed. Elbegdorj expects elections will be held in June 2004.

Following Mongolian practice, Elbegdorj is referred to by first name. In the United States, he's called E.B. He and his wife have four sons.

Elbegdorj was a sergeant who sent poetry to his army newspaper. Later, he won one of two slots in a military political institute in the Soviet Union. He studied military journalism there. Two years later, in 1990, he became editor-in-chief of the first regular free newspaper in Mongolia which shaped public opinion against Communist ideology, his résumé says.

Starting in 1989, he led the Democratic Union of Mongolia. In 1991, he was president of the Entrepreneurs Association, which helped herders own livestock and get property from socialist collectives.

He's pleased to see that a think tank can succeed in a relatively small community such as Midland, not just big cities such as Washington, D.C. He visited the Heritage Foundation there.

His résumé says he's:

- the founding president of Liberty Center. It's a three-year-old nongovernmental organization supporting reform of politics and justice in Mongolia, strengthening of its democratic society, and protection of human rights and liberty.

- ex-chairman of his country's leading political party for democracy, market economy and open society. Formerly collectivized land is being privatized, and apartments have switched to private ownership, he said.

- a recent graduate of a mid-career master's degree program in public administration at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government in Cambridge, Mass. He learned English in Boulder, where he studied at the Economic Institute, University of Colorado. And he's been watching how Americans live and how the nation's political and economic mechanisms work.



A little about Elbegdorj Tsakhia

Elbegdorj Tsakhia's résumé lists these awards:

- Star of Press Freedom from the Association of Mongolian Journalists in 2000 for efforts to establish and contribute to the protection of the free press.

- Star of Liberty from the Mongolian Democratic Union in 1999 for contribution to creation of Mongolian democracy.

- Order of Great Labor's Red Banner from Mongolia's president in 1996 for contribution to strengthening the democratic system.

- Young Politician of the Year, from the Youth Federation of Mongolia in 1992.

Before 1990, almost none of Mongolia's gross domestic product was generated by private companies. They now generate 75 percent of GDP, Elbegdorj said.

Mongolia started switching, without bloodshed, to parliamentary democracy in early 1990, but adjusting to economic and political reforms hasn't been easy for some of his countrymen, Elbegdorj said.

"It's very difficult to change the mindset of people," he said.

The youngest of a herdsman's eight sons, he was prime minister for part of 1998 — the second of four prime ministers during four years the Mongolian National Democratic Party was in power.

He recalls that in 1990, James Baker was the first U.S. secretary of state to visit Mongolia. "It was very encouraging" when Baker told Mongolians the United States could be their third strategic neighbor, Elbegdorj said.

The Internet and other aspects of information technology "makes us more equal," Elbegdorj said, referring to people and countries.

In late 1995, Elbegdorj wrote his political party's platform. Modifying Republican Newt Gingrich's phrase, "I called it Contract with Mongolia, and we won with that program" in the 1996 parliamentary election, Elbegdorj said.