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Time running out for shrinking Japan

By David McNeill

Battered by economic problems, weighed down by crushing public debt and skippered by a lumbering gerontocracy that seems powerless to stop the country's slow decline, it's tough times for leaky old Japan Inc. Now the country faces potentially its most serious problem yet – it is quickly running out of babies.

After years of steadily declining birthrates, the fertility rate of Japanese women in 2003 fell below 1.3 for the first time, fewer than their counterparts in many other advanced industrial nations and well below the level needed to maintain Japan's population of 127 million. [1]

If the trend continues, the population will plummet to just over 100 million by 2050, shrinking the country's labor pool by more than a third and dragging down its national wealth.

Government bureaucrats are nervously eyeing the other end of the population pyramid, where life expectancy rates continue to stretch ahead of the rest of the world, meaning the contracting workforce will be asked to support a growing army of pensioners. By 2025, there will be just two younger workers supporting each retired person, claims veteran Japan watcher Alex Kerr. [2]

"This is a very serious situation," warns Wada Ritsuko, an economist who specializes in the fertility issue at Nomura Research Institute. "Working-age people pay for the elderly. Many people believe the pension they pay today is saved by the government and comes back to them when they retire, but actually it's spent right away, so my children will have to pay for me. If the number of elderly people keeps rising, the system will collapse." In 2002, Health Minister Sakaguchi Chikara described the situation even more dramatically: "Japanese will become extinct unless the nation's birthrate stops falling."

The solutions to the problem seem obvious enough; either somehow persuade women to have more babies or throw the country open to millions of immigrants. But both approaches promise to be a hard sell.

Japanese women are working longer, marrying later if at all, postponing children, and enjoying freedoms their mothers never dreamt of. The idea of giving this up for motherhood in a cramped flat with a workaholic husband, almost two million of whom work over 60 hours a week doesn't hold much appeal.

"Many women rightly think it is a very lonely road having a baby," says Kawanishi Yuko, a sociologist specializing in family issues at Tokyo Gakugei University. "Until recently, we had a wider family and community that helped rear children. Now we have life in small isolated apartments and a husband who is not there to give support. It's too much hard work and too lonely."

Despite the looming birthrate crisis, working mums get little support. State day-care centers are scarce and private alternatives are prohibitively expensive for most. Women struggling to climb up the corporate ladder find maternity leave spells career suicide in a country where less than eight percent of senior management posts are held by females. [3]

It is for this reason, observers say, that women often decline the option of paid maternity leave, available since 1992. "The working environment means many women are reluctant to have babies because they think their boss and male colleagues won't accept it," says Wada. "In their 30s, women start really enjoying their job and taking on more responsibility, so they fear that if they ask for a year off the boss will say 'That's women for you.'"

Can the Diet, where women make up just seven per cent of the lawmakers (putting it 98th in the world) offer a solution to this problem? Not if a string of sexist comments last year by the older, conservative men who dominate that institution are anything to go by. A typical example was a summer 2003 speech by then Prime Minister Mori Yoshio in which he condemned the government for paying social security benefits to childless women.

There is, of course, another solution; some are turning their attention instead to the massive pool of cheap labor on Japan's doorstep to alleviate the fertility crisis. There are signs that some are now prepared to think the previously unthinkable – mass, controlled immigration.
The ex-chairman of Keidanren, Japan's top business federation, Okuda Hiroshi, said in November 2002 that his organization is in favor of importing up to 6.1 million foreign workers in the near future. Sakanaka Hidenori, director of the Tokyo Immigration Bureau, went further earlier this year when he said that Japan will have to accept close to 30 million immigrants over the next half century. [4] Even Tokyo governor Ishihara Shintaro, despite a well-earned reputation for xenophobia and racism, told this writer in a 2003 interview that he supports the importation of millions of legal foreign workers, although he added he would put this process under the control of the police. [5]

But is Japan really ready for mass US-style immigration: with just 1.5 percent of its population classified as foreign, Japan remains uniquely homogeneous among the advanced industrial countries. The foreign-born labor force in Japan, at a fraction of one percent, stands in stark contrast to Australia (24 percent), the US (16 percent), Britain (5 percent) and even Ireland (7 percent).

For generations, Japanese bureaucrats made a virtue of the country's economic policy and social harmony making life rough for the small numbers of "gaijin," or outsiders, who crept under the bar, particularly those from Asian countries. Until recently, even the Japan-born children of Chinese and Korean laborers brought to the county before or after World War Two had to register and fingerprint as "aliens". Changing Japan's exclusionist mindset will not be easy, say observers.

"Japan needs this much immigration, but is Japan willing to show how much it wants it by treating foreigners like human beings," asks anti-discrimination campaigner Arudou Debido, who fought a prolonged court battle after being barred from a bathhouse. "Japan's laws are not there to protect foreigners they are there to police them. Only foreigners can be stopped in the street and asked their identity for no reason. Only they can be stopped entry into bathhouses and bars. Racial discrimination is not illegal in Japan. That should tell you how seriously it takes integration."
The results of this clash between an increasingly outdated ideology and the needs of the business world that wants cheap, docile foreign labor are visible all over the country, where tales of discrimination involving pubs, hotels, hot spring resorts and real estate

agents are rife.

Englishman Paul Shepard, for instance, who has lived in Japan on and off for more than two decades, has a son to a Japanese wife and speaks the language fluently, was banned from his local bar in Koshigaya, Saitama Pref. last year. "I was a regular customer. But one night they suddenly said: 'foreigners can't come in.'" He tried two other bars, each with similar signs posted barring foreigners, before deciding he'd had enough. "I recorded one of the managers refusing me entry and took the tape to the local city office and the Ministry of Justice. Three weeks later I called back and they said, 'Look, we know there's discrimination in Japan but there is no law to stop it. Sorry." He is currently preparing a lawsuit against the bars in question.

Tokyo's dismal treatment of refugees is more evidence of its fear of the foreign hordes. Japan has supported three major US-led armed conflicts since 1990: the Persian Gulf War, the 2002 war in Afghanistan and the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and wars invariably increase the flow of refugees. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, up to 500,000 Kurds fled across the Iraqi border into Turkey. Japan has yet to accept a single Kurdish refugee, despite its support for the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the few who have managed to get into the country are usually thrown into detention centers. [6] As Diego Rosero of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Tokyo said in 2003, "Japan wants all the benefits of globalization but none of the headaches."

Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of non-Japanese have arrived here over the last two decades to fill the growing need for certain kinds of labor. Many live uneasily in a country that often seems to view them as a spreading contagion. Teranaka Makoto, secretary general of Amnesty Japan says: "The number of foreigners is slowly growing here, creating a sort of moral panic especially about crime because they are being used as scapegoats. You can easily find police now who say that safe Japan has collapsed and that foreigners are mostly to blame."

The government has dealt so far with its looming population crisis by avoiding a much-needed national debate and allowing gaijin to dribble in under a variety of disguises. Young Chinese pay huge fees to universities where many will never study, disappearing instead into the illegal economy; thousands of foreigners enter on "technical trainee" visas and help to prop up the small-business sector, and a quarter of a million people live in permanent fear of being deported.

But the authorities' tortuous attitude toward immigration is best seen in the recent influx of South Americans, many of whom are the children of Japanese who themselves immigrated after the Second World War.

"Allowing thousands of Brazilians, Peruvians and Bolivians to come in after 1990 was an opening of the door, but the authorities still stuck to what was literally a blood-relation approach," says Professor Tom Gill, an anthropologist at Meiji Gakuin University. "The more Japanese you were, the more you could stay, and the more you could be trusted. If you could prove you had two Japanese parents, you got a longer working visa than if you had one; if you had a parent, you could stay longer than if you had a Japanese grandparent, and so on."

Many of these recent South American immigrants (including an estimated 280,000 Japanese Brazilians) prop up large sections of Japan's small and mid-sized business sector, on wages that would send the average salaryman running for cover. Bruno Rodrigues Hirama, who says he gets his Japanese ancestry from his great-grandfather, is still in his teens but works a full week on a short-term contract making palates at a glass factory in Tsukui, Kanagawa Prefecture for about 100,000 yen a month. "It's about the average wage in the factory," he says. "I just want to get out of here and go back to Brazil when I get enough money." Inevitably, poor wages, discrimination and the failure to properly integrate such a large ethnic group has created alienation and the rich potential for future social problems among the children of these immigrants.

The stakes in Japan's shaky embrace of the multicultural society have been upped with the opening of an Immigration Bureau Web site that encourages Japanese residents to inform on suspicious foreigners. The criteria for what constitutes "suspicious" includes non-Japanese who "cause disturbances" in the neighborhood and those that simply provoke "repugnance or anxiety," vague enough to include anything from real criminal behavior to smelling of garlic. And the informer does not even have to leave a contact name or address. "It's quite unique," says Amnesty's Mr. Teranaka. "Basically it's inciting discrimination against foreigners."

The anonymous "snitch site" comes on the back of a series of initiatives, including DNA police profiling of foreigners, and a steady stream of anti-foreign comments by senior political and police figures that have the ripe smell of xenophobia. The government of Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has promised to again make Japan "the world's safest country," explicitly linking this goal to the attempt to slash juvenile and foreign crime and cut the number of people working illegally in Japan, estimated at 250,000 people, by half. And Governor Ishihara, despite his support for controlled immigration, has kept up a steady stream of anti-foreigner rhetoric.

Mr. Arudou says: "When it's getting to the stage where people can say these things without fear, we have to worry." "This isn't just some right-wing fringe element like Enoch Powell [who infamously warned in the late 1960s that British streets would become "rivers of blood" if immigration was allowed to go unchecked]. This involves the governor of Tokyo, the vice-governor of Tokyo who is a former policeman, and other senior figures. More people are being emboldened to discriminate because of initiatives like the police DNA profiling and the web site. That's why problems like the type Mr. Shepard experienced are getting worse."

How much of the hysteria is justified? The National Police Agency announced in May 2004 that crime by foreigners rose again in 2003 and that it had caught over 40,000 foreign criminals, but critics point out that fully a third of these were for infringements such as visa violations, and that just 2.4 percent of all crime in Japan is committed by non-Japanese.

Campaigners say immigrants naturally drift toward petty crime when they do not have the legal and social safeguards their counterparts in other countries enjoy. Others accuse the police of trying to shift the blame for soaring crime and plummeting detection rates, which have dropped below 20 percent for the first time since the Second World War. Amnesty's Teranaka says: "The police used to use fear of juvenile crime to increase their budget, now it is foreigners."
Japan is of course not alone in experiencing a recent rise in xenophobic sentiment. The post-9/11 political and legal climate in the US has also made life very difficult for thousands of immigrants there, particularly since the introduction of the 2001 Patriot Act.

Immigration lawyer Abira Ashfaq told a U.S. conference on immigration issues in 2003 that U.S. immigration officials are "currently detaining 20,000 people," up from 5,500 in 1993. A Muslim civil rights group, The Council on American-Islamic Relations, issued a report claiming there had been a record number of verbal and physical attacks on U.S. Muslims in 2003/04. Campaigner Hardeep Mann, said: "A lot of South Asians, especially Muslims, live in fear in the United States." One telling indication of how welcome foreigners feel in the U.S. is the plunge in foreign applications to universities there – down 35 percent according to a recent survey by the Council of Graduate Schools of 113 American universities.

Japan, though, may be unique among the advanced countries in having no law specifically targeting discrimination against foreigners, with the result that businesses of the type that Mr. Shepard tried to enter are free to blatantly discriminate against non-Japanese. Months after he was barred from his local bar, these signs are still posted all over Koshigaya. "Japan says it's helping the Iraqi people by sending its troops over there," says Mr. Shepard. "Let's bring one of those Iraqis to my local pub in Koshigaya. Then we'll see how serious Japan is about helping foreigners. This country needs an anti-discrimination law. In principle, what happened to

me was just wrong."

Will Japan emerge unscathed from the efforts of some to hold back the rest of the world? There are both depressing and encouraging indicators. A Cabinet Office survey conducted in May this year found that 80 percent of respondents believed Japan should accept more foreign laborers, although their responses were weighed down with qualifiers, with nearly 26 percent saying the current system of controls over immigrants should be maintained, and 39 percent believing elderly and female Japanese "should be employed before foreigners." The survey also found that 70 percent of Japanese "are worried that an increase in the number of illegally employed foreign workers could undermine public safety and result in human rights abuses against the workers themselves."

A solution can't come soon enough for Tony Lazlo, director of Issho Kikaku, an NPO that researches and supports multicultural issues in Japan:

"Countries and governments can change their immigration policies in two ways," he says. "Either with vision -- making bold, inventive and imaginative decisions. Or by necessity, which is more painful, because you're changing under duress. We hope change will come from vision, because that's the kind of history Japan has. But we're running kind of late for a decision."

Notes

1. See "Japan's declining birthrate accelerates," Japan Times, June 11, 2004. Statistics released in June by the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry.
2. Alex Kerr, (2000) Dogs and Demons: The Fall of Modern Japan, Penguin.
3. Survey by Businesswoman's Association. Available online at: http://www.bwasa.co.za (24/7/2004).
4. See "Gaikokujin ukeire seisaku wa hyakunen no kei de aru," (A Long-Term Vision for the Admission of Foreigners), Chuo Koron, February 2004.
5. Published as "Still angry after all these years," South China Morning Post, April 6, 2003.
6. See David McNeill, "Japan's refugee policies failing," Japan Times, March 23, 2003.
7. See also, Hiroshi Matsubara, "Kurdish asylum-seekers stage sit-in in Shibuya, Japan Times, July 17, 2004.

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