

New legislation needed for a multicultural Japan

Foreign residents make up only 1.4 percent of Japan's population, but since they tend to settle in certain localities, the number of municipalities where foreigners have a significant presence is rising nationwide. One example is Oizumi, a town in Gunma Prefecture, where as many as 15 percent of the residents are non-Japanese.

In May 2001, 13 of these municipalities, including Oizumi, formed the Committee for Localities with a Concentrated Foreign Population. These localities are home to a large number of foreigners, especially Brazilian workers of Japanese descent, many of whom arrived in Japan after the revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act in 1990.

The member cities, which comprise Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture, meet there regularly to discuss ways to address issues arising from the swell in the number of foreign residents. The committee has identified education and social security as being key areas of concern.

Regarding education, the most serious problem is the increase of children who do not attend school. In many of the member municipalities, about 30 percent of school-age foreign children do not go to school, and the figure exceeds 50 percent in one city.

Consequently, some Brazilian children have failed to acquire communication skills in either Japanese or Portuguese. If this issue is neglected, it will eventually develop into a major social problem.

As for social security, poor health insurance coverage constitutes a major challenge. In Hamamatsu and Toyota, Aichi Prefecture, half of the foreigners have reportedly not taken out health care insurance.

The number of cases is on the rise nationwide in which foreigners without health care fail to receive medical treatment, either because they can't afford the treatment or because clinics refuse to offer treat-

ment.

In October 2001, the mayors of the 13 cities proclaimed the "Hamamatsu Declaration," which called on the central government to develop policies on the premise that many of the foreign residents would stay in Japan permanently.

Their proposals include enhancing Japanese-language courses at primary and junior high schools, taking measures to encourage children to go to school, revising the health insurance system and improving the work environment. The declaration represents a sharp criticism of the national government's lack of policies with regard to foreign residents.

Globalization has brought with it an increasing number of foreigners who are opting to settle in Japan. The number of foreign residents increased from 1.08 million in 1990 to 1.78 million in 2001.

In recent years, the number of foreigners who obtain permanent resident status has also risen sharply. Due to the increase in international marriages and naturalization, the number of Japanese nationals of diverse ethnic origins is also increasing.

The aging of society is another important factor for the growth of the foreign population. At 18.5 percent, Japan's ratio of elderly citizens is already one of the highest in the world. The figure is expected to reach 24 percent in 10 years.

The overall population will also begin declining in a few years, and it is estimated that the working-age population will decrease by nearly 5 million during the next decade.

Even if measures such as active employment of women and the elderly, automation in production facilities and the shift of production to foreign countries are taken, a further increase in the number of foreign workers coming to Japan will be inevitable.

To be prepared for these changes, it is essential to review policies on

foreigners as the Hamamatsu Declaration calls for. Taking one step further, I would like to propose the establishment of a "basic law for a multicultural society" that lays down the principles of social integration regarding foreigners and ethnic minorities.

In a multicultural society, people of diverse nationalities and ethnicities recognize their cultural differences and aim to develop relationships based on equality.

To build such a society, the basic law should provide fundamental principles, such as respect for human rights. It should also oblige national and prefectural governments to formulate a basic plan and set up an administrative system to promote appropriate measures.

To avoid the adverse effects of compartmentalized administrative structure, the national government should create a division within the Cabinet Office to coordinate the policies and measures of the related ministries and agencies.

Last month, the Committee for

Localities with a Concentrated Foreign Population held a conference in Tokyo. There, the committee members, representatives of five ministries and two agencies, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, gathered to discuss the issues addressed in the Hamamatsu Declaration.

This was the first time that the mayors of these cities, who are facing these problems on a daily basis, and the officials of the central government in charge of policy planning had a chance to meet.

I hope that the Tokyo conference will prompt the government to undertake a fundamental review of its policies on foreigners and establish a basic law for a multicultural society.

The author is an associate professor at Meiji University and chairs a study group on the establishment of a basic law for a multicultural society. He contributed this comment to The Asahi Shimbun.