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【課題】 第4部 英文B

Gov't must do more to tackle Japan's population decline

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Editorial: Gov't must do more to tackle Japan's population decline 

A panel of experts set up by the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry has worked out an interim report on how the government should respond to the decline in the population. The report listed up specific challenges Japan will likely face sometime around 2040 and urges the government to change its policy. 

The move apparently shows that the government has begun to squarely face the fear that the national and local governments may not be able to maintain their administrative functions in about 20 years from now. 

Countermeasures against the decline in the birthrate are important, but the advent of a depopulation society in Japan is inevitable. Nonetheless, the government of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has failed to confront such a reality and fallen one step behind in taking countermeasures against population decline. The Abe administration should launch efforts to work out long-term countermeasures. 

As of the autumn of last year, Japan's population was estimated at approximately 126.7 million, down some 230,000 from a year earlier, marking the seventh consecutive annual decline. 

The panel of experts set the target year for countermeasures against the fall in the population at 2040 because the panel anticipates that the demographic composition around that year

will be one in which it is the most difficult to run administrative bodies due to the decline and the aging of the population. 

Around 2040, Japan's population is estimated to fall by about 900,000 a year. Moreover, children of baby-boomers will become senior citizens, and the number of those aged at least 65 is expected to peak at some 40 million. 

The interim report cited three major risks that the central and local governments will face 20 years from now: The rapid aging of the population in the Tokyo metropolitan area and a crisis involving medical and nursing care services; a serious shortage of a young workforce; and the hollowing out of urban areas due to a sharp increase in vacant houses and aging infrastructure. 

The report also warns that generations who had difficulties finding full-time jobs could age without sufficient preparations for their post-retirement lives, and underscores the need to create enough employment opportunities for these generations. 

The report also encourages neighboring local governments to join hands in creating larger administrative districts and to promote the division of roles between themselves instead of having full administrative functions on their own. The basic direction of this recommendation is understandable, but such a measure could prompt a review of the existing roles of prefectural and municipal governments. 

The Abe Cabinet has placed priority on making short-term achievements such as economic growth and the revitalization of

local economies. However, strong political leadership is needed more in addressing such long-term challenges. 

The panel of experts will work out policy proposals next month. Bureaucrats from central government ministries concerned participated in discussions on a wide range of fields, from childrearing and education to medical and nursing care services, before the panel compiled the interim report. However, it still needs to flesh out the proposals with more specifics. 

The issue is too difficult for the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry alone to work on. The prime minister's office should create a system under which the entire government will tackle this serious issue.
