

PRIVACY ISSUE

Limits urged for resident registers

The Asahi Shimbun

A panel reviewing the open-viewing system of resident registers has recommended restrictions on disclosing information, such as names, addresses, birthdates and sex, to protect the public's privacy.

The advisory panel to Taro Aso, the internal affairs minister, compiled a report Thursday that says the four items of information should not be disclosed as freely as they are under the current system. The panel said measures are needed to prevent the information of residents from being used in direct mail services, market research and other commercial purposes.

Disclosure should be limited to work by the central and local governments, polls conducted by the media, and academic studies of universities and other research organizations, the report said.

"There is a need to strictly assess public interest related to planned polls," the panel said.

The criteria for disclosure should be whether results of planned polls will be publicized and whether the results would benefit society, according to the panel.

Anyone can basically view the four types of information

entered in resident registers at municipal government offices under the current system.

But calls for privacy protection have increased among the general public.

The panel said those wishing to view resident registers should submit documents outlining the contents of polls they plan to conduct. The users should also make clear how they plan to keep and discard the information obtained from the registers.

The names of the viewing parties should be made public, according to the panel.

The panel also said more severe fines should be considered if the viewers use the information in ways other than the initially stated purposes.

The panel also proposed a ban on photocopying lists of voters names as well as limiting viewing of such lists to research on elections and politics.

Calls for restricting access to resident registers mounted after a disturbing case in Nagoya. A man found the address of a girl living with a single parent by viewing the resident register at a ward office. He was arrested in February this year on suspicion of sexually assaulting the girl.



SHINJI MURAMATSU/THE ASAHI SHIMBUN

4 injured after car slams into students

Bicycles belonging to eight students of Zuiryu Junior High School in Hitachi-Ota, Ibaraki Prefecture, lay wrecked Friday after a car plowed into the group as they headed to school around 8 a.m. Four of the students, three first-year males and one female in the third year, were injured. According to police, the 23-year-old driver turned the steering wheel too sharply after he failed to properly negotiate a right bend. The vehicle hit a concrete wall on the side of the road, and then careened back to the left, slamming into the students who were walking their bikes on the sidewalk.

N. Korea now ready to discuss abduction issue

Pyongyang will also rejoin 6-way talks, says U.S. official.

By TARO KARASAKI

Staff Writer

North Korea is ready to unconditionally return to multilateral talks on dismantling its nuclear capabilities and reopen channels with Japan to discuss the thorny abduction issue, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson said Friday.

Richardson, just returned from a private four-day visit to North Korea, told the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan that officials in Pyongyang appeared "willing" to be more forthcoming on the abduction issue.

He said Pyongyang was also keen to resume talks on normalization of diplomatic relations with Japan.

Richardson's insights come at a time when Tokyo has been anxiously waiting for Pyongyang to send word on whether it plans to resume talks on all outstanding issues, including the abduction problem.

Tokyo announced Sept. 20 that the two sides had agreed to hold talks, but no date was set.

Richardson, accompanied by a delegation of 10, said he met with Kang Sok Ju, North

Korea's first vice foreign minister, and Kim Yong Nam, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly, among others. Richardson

Richardson visited from Monday to Thursday.

A former ambassador to the United Nations, Richardson has previously made four visits to North Korea.

He said the North Koreans were particularly keen to discuss the disputed DNA analysis of human remains that Pyongyang said were of abductee Megumi Yokota but which Tokyo dismissed as false.

The remains were handed to a Japanese delegation during intergovernmental consultations last year in Pyongyang. North Korea claims Yokota died in 1994.

On the nuclear issue, Richardson quoted North Korean officials as saying they were now ready to abide by the terms of Nuclear Nonproliferation

Treaty and allow international inspectors to monitor all nuclear facilities.

At the "appropriate time," he said Pyongyang was willing to invite International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohammed ElBaradei for discussions on how to manage nuclear materials.

"I strongly believe that we made progress in our discussions in North Korea on the diplomatic front, on the nuclear front, on the humanitarian front," Richardson said.

He said he had briefed U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill on the outcome of his talks.

Richardson said Pyongyang showed "flexibility" on its previous demand that a light-water reactor be provided before it dismantles all its other nuclear capabilities. Washington and Tokyo both oppose this idea.

He said the North Koreans had agreed to allow a third party—such as the IAEA—to oversee the introduction of nuclear fuel, operations and disposal of spent fuel.

Richardson said there were still snags to iron out, though. "There is still mistrust and still problems on sequencing (the dismantling process) and verification" on the North Korean side, he said.

Redress for 9,500 asbestos deaths

The Asahi Shimbun

Family members of up to 9,500 people who have died of mesothelioma will be eligible for payouts under a planned law designed to compensate victims of asbestos, the Environment Ministry said Friday.

The ministry said those victims, who were not covered by workers' accident insurance, are among an estimated 9,993 who have died of the asbestos-caused cancer since 1970.

The government is considering payouts of 2.4 million yen for families whose members were killed by mesothelioma, according to sources.

Data compiled by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare showed that 7,013 people died of mesothelioma between 1995 and 2004. But there were no statistics for mesothelioma deaths before 1995.

The Environment Ministry estimated the number of deaths at a maximum 2,195 between 1970 and 1994, based on a hypothesis that one individual would develop mesothelioma for every 170 tons of asbestos imported to Japan during that period, the officials said.

That means the total number of victims of mesothelioma is between 8,826 and 9,993, including those who died this year.

The lump-sum payment planned under the new law is intended to cover medical costs and other expenses after a patient develops mesothelioma.

The government plans to provide 2.4 million yen for each victim, based on estimated average monthly medical spending of 100,000 yen and an average two-year treatment period.

In light of the Atomic Bomb Survivors' Support Law, the government is also considering providing 190,000 yen for funeral costs, as well as 70,000 yen a month for patients undergoing treatment, the officials said.

The Environment Ministry is also planning to pay compensation for people killed by lung cancer caused by asbestos.

Panel backs first-born child as heir to the throne

The Asahi Shimbun

An advisory panel to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has reached a consensus that an emperor's first-born child—regardless of sex—should be the heir to the Chrysanthemum throne, sources said Friday.

The panel had earlier agreed that female emperors should be allowed, and that their children be able to ascend the throne to maintain stability in succession.

The panel is scheduled to compile a final report by the end of November and submit it to the prime minister.

Once the report is issued, the government will gauge public sentiment on the issue before

submitting a bill to the Diet to revise the Imperial House Law, officials said.

Opposition to allowing female emperors has already been voiced.

The panel in early October came up with two possible proposals in allowing a female emperor: One gave the oldest child of the emperor priority in succession, regardless of sex, while the other gave priority to the oldest son of the emperor, even if he was not the first-born child.

The panel decided that giving the first-born child priority to the throne would stabilize the succession system because the imperial heir would be

determined at the time of his or her birth, the sources said.

The system would also be easier for the public to understand, the sources said.

If the proposal is accepted, Princess Aiko, the 3-year-old daughter of Crown Prince Naruhito and Crown Princess Masako, would be first in line. No boy has been born in the imperial household for 40 years.

However, a group of scholars on Oct. 6 issued an "emergency statement" arguing that former imperial family members who withdrew from the imperial registration after Japan's defeat in World War II should be allowed to return to the im-

perial lineage. Such a move would put a male in line for the throne.

The group wants to maintain the imperial tradition of passing succession on to only males.

The prime minister's advisory panel said it will review the public opinions it has gathered so far and consolidate members' views at meetings starting Tuesday.

Some panel members have argued that public views on the issue could drastically change if a boy is born to the imperial family, the sources said.

"We had been discussing the matter with a sense that we represent the public," panel

chief Hiroyuki Yoshikawa, president of the National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology, told reporters Oct. 5. "We have no plans to solicit public feedback anew."

The government is also not planning to conduct public opinion polls on the matter, the sources said.

But a senior government official said, "This is a very difficult matter to deal with, for its historical importance."

The government plans to submit a bill to revise the Imperial House Law to the regular Diet session next year. But the move could be delayed depending on public opinion.

UPDATE

LDP expels 9 rebel members

The Asahi Shimbun

The Liberal Democratic Party, seeking the last word in the postal privatization dispute, officially expelled nine "rebels" on Friday after refusing to accept their resignations.

The rebels include former Lower House speaker Tamiyuki Watanuki and former party policy chief Shizuka Kamei.

They all joined new parties after Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi dissolved the Lower House on Aug. 8

and called a snap election.

They had submitted letters of resignation from the party, but LDP executives decided to expel them instead.

LDP executives are mulling disciplinary measures against 50 other party lawmakers who voted against the bills. The LDP will announce its decision next Friday.

Earlier Friday, the party's disciplinary committee started deliberations on all 59 rebel lawmakers, 37 of whom were in the Lower House.

NOBODY'S HOME

Door-to-door revolt: One in five households won't even sign a contract with scandal-ridden NHK, let alone pay mandatory viewer fees.

By YO KONISHI and KENTARO OIKAWA

The Asahi Shimbun

So many subscribers to scandal-ridden Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK) are refusing to pay mandatory viewer fees that the organization hinted in September it may take legal action against the scofflaws.

But NHK might have an even bigger problem, one that it has not addressed for a decade: the nearly 10 million households and companies that refuse to even sign a viewing contract with NHK, let alone pay the fees.

That means one in five households—8.87 million altogether—won't even let NHK get its foot in their door along with 710,000 offices.

By law, every household or company that owns a TV set is required to sign a contract with NHK. However, as in the case of the nonpayment of viewer fees, there are no legal penalties for those who refuse to sign contracts.

But that could change. Along with hinting at legal action against nonpaying subscribers, NHK said it is also considering legal measures against those households that refuse to sign contracts.

The persistent problem could be just a technical matter, officials say.

"Most cases involve those households that have just moved or with whom contact cannot be made even after repeated visits to the home," said an NHK official.

However, other experts said there were about 400,000 to 500,000 households that refuse to sign contracts because they are dissatisfied with the present legal structure that requires a signed contract and fee payment even if NHK programs are not watched.

The problem of unsigned households will likely add fuel to the debate that the entire viewer fee system should be changed drastically.

When television broadcasting began in Japan in 1953, there were only two networks, NHK and the Nippon Television Network Corp.

In 1964, an advisory panel to the posts and telecommunications minister issued a report that described the viewer fee system as appropriate if considered as a special contribution.

Another advisory panel to the minister in 1987 considered alternatives to pay for NHK programming, including commercials, taxes and pay-per-view programs. However, that panel's conclusion was that the "viewer fee system will still be appropriate for NHK in the future."

Calls for changing the fee

system to one that reflected viewing patterns became more prominent from the mid-1990s after a flood of new channels emerged. They were made possible through digital broadcasting using communications and broadcasting satellites.

In 2000, during debate on administrative reform, some experts touched upon changes that were needed at NHK.

Some questioned whether the current system of requiring owners of TV sets to sign contracts was still valid from the standpoint of respecting the will of viewers and reducing the burden on viewers.

Others said measures should be implemented to resolve the issue of unsigned households from the standpoint of maintaining fairness with those subscribers who have paid their fees and of obtaining transparency in the management situation at NHK.

In 2001, a year after NHK started BS digital broadcasting, the government's three-year plan for promoting deregulation included an item calling for consideration of introducing scrambled broadcasting of BS programming. Scrambling the signals would mean only subscribers who paid their fees would be able to view those programs.

The present government advisory panel on deregulation is also discussing scrambled broadcasting for NHK.

However, NHK executives have continued to oppose that proposal.

Their argument is: In order to fulfill the role of public broadcasting of responding to the needs of viewers without being influenced by television ratings or specific interests, we need an independent fiscal base, and the current viewer fee system is the ideal one for obtaining that base.

However, some scholars say that if viewers can prove they do not watch NHK, they should be able to absolve themselves from the obligation of signing a viewer contract with NHK.

The debate about NHK's viewer fee system could lead to a fundamental change in not only the state of public broadcasting, but of the broadcasting sector as a whole.

In the revival plan announced by NHK in September, the public broadcaster said it would consider having summary courts send invoices to subscribers who refuse to pay their fees, which total 16,740 yen for a year for households with a color set.

Those who also receive programming through broadcasting satellites pay a total of 28,080 yen a year.

EXPERTS WEIGH IN

NHK needs radical reform

The Asahi Shimbun

Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK) must take drastic measures if it hopes to rebuild a relationship of trust with viewers, experts say.

This can only happen if it allows viewers to participate in any debate on the future funding of the public broadcaster, says Hiroshi Matsuda, a former professor of media studies at Kyoto's Ritsumeikan University.

Public broadcasting is indispensable, he says. It is vital to have a form of media that is not influenced by government power and capital interests, but can provide a forum for information and debate from the standpoint of citizens.

In his opinion, the viewer fee system is the only fiscal framework that will, in the end, not create a gap in information due to income differences. In short, it provides the needed universal service to viewers, he says. The problem with NHK now is its failure to foster a relation-

ship of participation by viewers based on trust like the one in Britain with the BBC.

He says that rather than simply talk about independence from government power, it is important to provide specific action, such as saying: We will end explanations to politicians about specific programs prior to broadcast.

Shigeyuki Tahara, author of a book on NHK's recent problems with nonpaying subscribers, said NHK should listen to third parties if it is truly serious about reforming itself.

There will be no future for public broadcasting if NHK only proposes a resuscitation program consisting of words only and no specifics, and if it insists on taking legal measures against those who refuse to sign viewing contracts, Tahara said.

Also, reviving the viewer fee system is not an issue that can be resolved within NHK. It should be left up to a wide social debate as well as proposals submitted by viewers.