

Japanese campaign focuses on child care [JP] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Child care has emerged as a major issue in Japan's election on Sunday. The country's largest parties are trying to woo voters with promises of cheaper day care and more child allowances.

Nobuko Jitsukata knew she would get a lot of complaints when her Federation of Preschools opened up a parent hotline in March. After all, 40,000 parents were on a waiting list to get their children into government-subsidized day care.

What Jitsukata did not expect were the heartbreaking stories.

She says mothers called to say they needed day care to work and feed their children. Single parents said the lack of child care had forced them to move in with relatives. In the worst cases, mothers and fathers were leaving their children at home alone.

Jitsukata says the number of children waiting for public day care slots nearly doubled last fall - in part because of the global economic downturn. Many stay-at-home mothers had to re-enter the work force and needed a place to take their children.

She says that day-care employees tell us that it is unlike anything they have experienced before. People are asking to register their children before they are born.

The soaring demand for preschools has put child care at center stage in Japan's general election Sunday.

The opposition Democratic Party of Japan vows to increase the monthly \$100 allowance per child for families, regardless of income.

The ruling Liberal Democratic Party countered with a plan to make government child care free. And it pledges to increase the number of day-care facilities and cut waiting lists.

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He says a large aging population and low birthrate are fundamental hurdles this country must overcome. The political parties are looking to tackle the birth rate issue first, by helping financially.

Japan's birth rate remains among the lowest in the world with women averaging only one child in their lifetime. Government surveys cite financial concerns and worries over the lack of child care support as the leading reasons couples are not having children.

This has long-term economic and development implications. Already, because of its low birthrate, Japan's population is shrinking and experts say it could be down by a third within 40 years. Moreover, within a few years, a quarter of the population will be over age 65, which means there will be fewer workers to support more and more retirees.

Jitsukata says the country has done little to counter the trend. While day-care registration has gone up 20 percent, the number of centers has largely remained the same. She sees no point in handing out money when there is no day care to spend it on.

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Her only choice is a private preschool that costs double the public one.

"Either we pay a lot of money and start now or just wait until April and get into a cheaper public one," she said.

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