

Low birthrate causes alarm

U.N. report shows Korea's; population aging rapidly

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South Korea has one of the lowest birthrates in the world, even below the average in industrialized countries, a United Nations agency said yesterday in its 2004 world population report.

The average birthrate from 2000 to 2005 in Korea was 1.41 per person, 26th lowest among other countries, compared to the average of 1.56 in industrialized countries, the United Nations Population Fund said in "The State of World Population 2004" report.

The low birthrate contributes to an aging population problem in Korea, as shown by statistics on the increasing number of older citizens and the declining number of youth.

"Countries where fertility has fallen sharply will see a dramatic aging of their population in the decades ahead, a trend well underway in developed countries and a major policy concern," the report said.

The Korea National Statistical Office reported last year that the number of youth under the age of 15 would drop from 23.4 percent in 1995 to 19.6 percent in 2005, while the number of people above 64 would rise from 5.9 percent in 1995 to 9 percent in 2005.

The average life expectancy of Koreans is 71.8 years for men and 79.3 for women, compared to an average 72.1 for men and 79.4 for women in industrialized countries. Japan recorded the longest life expectancy with 77.9 for men and 85.1 for women.

South Korea's population in 2004 reached 48 million, up 300,000 compared to last year, and was the 26th largest in the world, the report said.

Combined with 22.8 million North Koreans, a total of 70.8 million people live on the Korean Peninsula.

China was again listed as the most populous nation with 1.31 billion, followed by India with 1.08 billion and the United States 297 million.

The global population was estimated to grow by a whopping 40 percent from 6.4 billion in 2004 to 8.9 billion in 2050. While the population growth in developed countries is minimal, developing countries are expected to represent 96 percent of the population growth.

The report also showed the two Koreas in stark contrast in terms of infant and maternal mortality rates.

Of every 1,000 live births, 45 North Korean infants died, compared to five in South Korea. Among every 100,000 births, there were 67 maternal deaths in the North, to 20 in the South.

The report said there had been steady progress in the past decade toward boosting the status of women and providing reproductive health care but billions more dollars were needed to reach goals set 10 years ago.

Nearly all of the 151 poor countries surveyed by the agency have put laws or policies in place to protect the rights of women and girls, although laws on violence against women are often not enforced.

The report referred to the social and economic disadvantages faced by women which made them particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

"In Africa today, women are 1.3 times more likely than men to be infected with HIV," it said. "Young women aged 15-24 are two and a half times more likely to be infected than young men."

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