

Heed the Warning from Korea's Population Clock

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Korea's population clock is ticking towards 2018. The nation's population is projected to rise to an all-time high of 49.34 million by 2018. We may have to celebrate reaching a record population level that year, as there is a saying that population means fall to 48.63 million in 2030, 42.34 million in 2050 and 16.21 million in 2100. As the population growth comes to an end, the national economy and power will likely decline at the same time. The dark shadow of a shrinking population is already visible in South Jeolla Province. In 2007, the number of its residents aged over 65 exceeded the number of children under the age of 14 for the first time.

The nation may now be forced to recycle most of the vacant school buildings as homes for the aged. We will soon live in a wholly different society, where most subway seats are reserved for use by the elderly, for instance. A far more serious problem is that the working population aged between 15 and 64 is on the decline. An increase in the working population boosts consumption and economic growth, as a larger number of people find employment, get married, have babies and buy homes. These days, restaurants and retail stores in Daegu and North Gyeongsang Province are complaining of poor sales. Consumption in the regions has declined during the past three years as they have lost about 8,000 working adults annually. The situation is similar in other parts of the country, including Busan, Gangwon Province and North and South Jeolla provinces.

We now have 10 years until 2018. What preparations do we have to make? In Israel, the Jewish people are in danger of being reduced to the minority status, as the per-

national power. Like the two faces of Janus, however, the year 2018 may signal the beginning of a tragedy. Korea's population growth will stop in 2018 and begin to shrink thereafter.

The nation's population is projected to centage of Israelis of Palestinian origin in the entire population has exceeded 45 percent. The Israeli government began to fully cover artificial insemination expenses for infertile Jewish couples after declaring that a population threat is more disastrous than security threat. Even Singapore, known for its image of abstinence, hosted a sex expo several years ago because its birth rate had fallen sharply. The Singaporean government explained that the sex expo was intended to encourage family formation and childbirth through a healthy sex life.

In France, parents with children younger than three years old are given special allowances, while an employed married woman is entitled to a one-year childcare leave and special subsidies in return for giving birth to a third child. The French government has spent as much as 49 trillion won on the childbirth campaign. As a result, France's birth rate rose from 1.6 (per 1,000 of the population) in 1994 to 2.1 last year. Germany, the first European country to experience a population decrease as far back as the early 1970s, has resorted to immigration in resolving its population problem. But the immigration policy cannot be an efficient alternative for Korea, as we cannot find appropriate immigrants and the immigration policy doesn't conform to national sentiment.

If the population decline is left neglected, however, the nation could be split into such populous central provinces as Gyeonggi and

Chungcheong and sparsely populated Gyeongsang and Jeolla provinces in the south. Pension and medical insurance payers are decreasing, whereas their beneficiaries are multiplying. Conflict seems inevitable between the young and old generations. If there is no breakthrough in addressing the population decrease, the government has to make better use of labor of women and elderly people. Finland created a special employment program for senior citizens in the late 1990s, vowing to adapt the society to the shortfall of young workers. The European country raised its employment rate by 13 percent in a period of five years through retraining and job placement services.

Korea's current provision of childcare subsidies and artificial insemination expenses to low-income earners won't be

effective in increasing the population. The government has to help working married couples have more babies by unconditionally offering various state subsidies to them. The population problem is critical in determining the rise and fall of a nation. Between 2018 and 2050, as many as 7 million will disappear from the Korean population. Demographers say it generally takes three times more time to offset policy mistakes and recover population. Whether we will greet 2018 as a year of celebration or a year of tragedy will depend on our choice.

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