

## EDITORIAL

## Reintroducing the Ainu

Both chambers of the Diet unanimously passed a resolution last week urging the government to recognize the Ainu as an indigenous people. It says the fact that many Ainu people suffered discrimination and poverty during Japan's modernization should be taken seriously. Noting that the Ainu have their own language, religion and culture, it urges the government to heed expert opinions in promoting policy measures that benefit the people.

The resolution thus clearly recognizes that the Ainu suffered under Japan's past assimilation policy. In 1869 Japan gave Hokkaido its current name, unilaterally declared the island part of Japan, and established *Kaitakushi* (the Development Commission) to encourage Japanese to migrate there.

Friday's resolution is historic in view of the persistent ideology that Japan is an ethnically homogeneous nation. We hope the resolution will help people break a conformist view of Japanese history so that they take a fresh look at it from a wider perspective — something that will strengthen Japan's democracy.

When the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007, Japan was among the 144 member states that voted for it. But the government refused to recognize the Ainu as indigenous, arguing that a universal definition of indigenous people does not exist. It also feared the possibility that some Ainu would claim compensation for lands their ancestors were deprived of during modernization.

It is encouraging that, after passage of the Diet

resolution, Chief Cabinet Secretary Nobutaka Machimura expressed the belief that as the Ainu people hand down their traditions and dignity to succeeding generations, it will contribute to the vitality of a society in which diverse values coexist.

In 2006, 38.3 percent of some 24,000 Ainu people living in Hokkaido were on welfare. Only 17.4 percent had received a college education. A planned governmental panel should include Ainu so that effective measures will be taken.

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