

Japan faces U.N. racism criticism

GENEVA (Kyodo) Japan's record on racism has improved, but there is still room for progress, according to the U.N. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

"We heard today much that is good and positive, but I think a deepened engagement would be welcomed and necessary," Patrick Thornberry, the member of the committee responsible for Japan's review, said Wednesday.

The review, the first for Japan since 2001, is required of signatory countries to the 1965 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, which Japan ratified in December 1995.

Fourteen Japanese officials from five ministries, headed by Ambassador in Charge of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Hideaki Ueda, flew from Japan to field questions and comments from the committee of 18 legal experts.

Thornberry particularly criticized Japan's lack of laws to combat hate speech, saying "in international law, freedom of expression is not unlimited."

The convention commits states to fight racial discrimination by taking such steps as restricting racist speech and criminalizing membership in racist organizations. Japan has expressed reservations about some of the provisions, which it says go against its commitment to freedom of expression and assembly.

Prior to the review, Japanese nongovernmental organizations presented various examples they say highlight the need for legislative action to fight racism in their country.

"There seems to have been little progress since 2001," when the last review was held, committee member Regis de Gouttes said. "There is no new legislation, even though in 2001 the committee said prohibiting hate speech is compatible with freedom of expression."

Committee members also criticized the treatment of certain segments of society, such as the "burakumin" (descendants of Japan's former outcast class), and the people of Okinawa.

"The 'buraku' situation is a form of racial discrimination," committee member Fatimata-Binta Victoire Dah said. "It is frighteningly similar to the caste system in Africa."

Many members of the committee, however, praised the government's recent recognition of the Ainu as an indigenous people.

But there was also criticism of the treatment of Chinese and Korean nationals, in matters ranging from the lack of accreditation of their schools, to the necessity, at times, for them to change their names when they obtain Japanese citizenship.

The NGOs, before the review, showed the committee members a video of a group of nationalists waving flags and protesting aggressively in front of a North Korean school in Kyoto Prefecture, shouting phrases such as "This is a North Korean spy training center!"

"Why are these children guilty of what North Korea is doing?" committee member Ion Diaconu asked.

Some members of the committee also expressed concern that such schools did not receive any government funding at a time when the government is considering removing tuition fees for public high schools.

The Japan Times: Friday, Feb. 26, 2010
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