

Tokyo homeless shelter opens

Holiday substitute for '08 Hibiya Park tent city

By MARIKO KATO

Staff writer

A holiday-season shelter set up by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government opened Monday in Shibuya Ward to take in hundreds of laid-off workers.

Funded by the central government, the shelter is a substitute for the tent village set up last year by antipoverty groups in Hibiya Park.

The shelter at the National Olympics Memorial Youth Center will be open through Jan. 4. The complex is the renovated athletes' village for the 1964 Summer Games.

"It is a more difficult situation than last year and the problem has become long-term," Naoto Kan, deputy prime minister and state strategy minister, said while viewing the complex in the afternoon.

Labor and welfare minister Akira Nagatsuma and Mizuho Fukushima, another Cabinet member and leader of the Social Democratic Party, also visited the shelter.

At this time last year, daily reports from the Hibiya Park tent village dominated the holiday news, and about 500 workers received free food, shelter and consultations from nongovernmental organizations and other volunteers.

This year, the government decided to take the initiative and will provide similar support, opening up 500 rooms at the shelter.

"We have already received 350 applications and it looks like it may reach 500," a staff member said.

The complex is open to homeless people who have signed up at government-run Hello Work job centers to look for employment, or registered beforehand by telephone. By early afternoon, more than 100 people had settled in.

The shelter reflects the government's concern that employment conditions have not improved since last year.

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate rose for the first time in four months to 5.2 percent in November. In the same month, the ratio of job offers to job seekers was a seasonally adjusted 0.45, roughly half the figure at the same time last year.

"There was a man in his 60s who was too ill to work, and had been living in a capsule hotel until yesterday, and three young people who had been living in a park," Nagatsuma said after he spoke to some of the job seekers inside the complex.

Makoto Yuasa, an antipoverty activist and leader of last year's tent village, also visited the shelter as an adviser to the Cabinet and applauded the government's actions.

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Home away from home: Displaced workers exit a bus Monday to enter their temporary shelter for the New Year's holidays at the National Olympics Memorial Youth Center in Shibuya Ward, Tokyo. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO