



The Japan Parliamentarians Federation for Population

NEWS LETTER

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Study Visit to Japan by Members of the Thai Senate Public Health Committee: Observing Japan's Responses to Aging Issues

Led by Hon. Dr. Jetn Sirathranont, Chair of the Public Health Committee of the Senate of Thailand and Secretary-General of the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD), a party of 16 Thai delegates including seven parliamentarians has visited Japan to learn about the country's experience in aging population, and to observe practical measures for this issue. On 25 September the group attended the Aging Population Programs Division of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's (TMG) Bureau of Social Welfare and Public Health and paid a courtesy call to Mr. Takashi Kogawa, the Division's Senior Director. In addition, the delegates visited Tokyo Kosaien, a social welfare corporation located in Mitaka City in western Tokyo.



The Delegation's Visit to the TMG's Bureau of Social Welfare and Public Health

Hon. Dr. Jetn began by explaining the reasons for the group's visit to Japan. The delegation aim to learn the policies that Japan has been adopting, where an aging society has long made its presence felt, and to observe how having an aging society currently plays out in Japan. This could help Thailand adopt policies for its own aging population.

Mr. Kogawa spoke about the TMG's aging projects, as set out in the *Tokyo Metropolitan Government Plan for the Health and Welfare of the Elderly: 2015-2017*, which were governed by the fact that Japan's experience of population aging has no parallel anywhere else in the world. Mr. Kogawa said that senior citizens already made up over 20% of Tokyo's total population, which would age even more rapidly in the years ahead. In a big city like Tokyo, the number of its elderly residents living alone will increase further, so there is a pressing need to improve the infrastructure of nursing care services, which is one of TMG's policy focus areas. Mr. Kogawa noted that as Japan often highlighted a "declining birthrate" in the same breath as an "aging population" to describe its demographic situation, in parallel with policies for an aging population the country also needed to have policies to reverse its low birthrates in place at once.

The Thai visitors asked questions about the proportion of the TMG's budget that went on social welfare; the source of the social welfare budget; and whether taxes such as Japan's consumption tax would be increased to pay for its social welfare expenditure. According to the TMG, its social welfare budget accounts for about 20% of its overall budget, and before resorting to any increase in taxes, the TMG's view is that overall wastage issues, in particular waste of medicine, need to be reduced first.

The Delegation's Visit to Tokyo Kosaien

The Thai delegates then visited Tokyo Kosaien in Mitaka City, a facility which incorporates a nursing care center, a comprehensive support center, and a nursing home that offers both intensive and regular nursing care. The inclusion of a child day-care center also makes Tokyo Kosaien a fully integrated welfare center.



The visitors were first given an introduction from Mr. Kiyoshi Tanaka, Managing Director and Center Director at Tokyo Kosaien, and also Head of the Department of Surgery at the JR Tokyo General Hospital. Mr. Tanaka gave the participants a short history of Tokyo Kosaien and an overview of its activities. Tokyo Kosaien was established in 1955 by a “railway benefit association” to contribute to the welfare of elderly people. After starting off as a single facility it had gradually expanded over the years, and now it operates a total of seven facilities – six for elderly people and one for pre-school children. Including its day care services, it supports around 400 people a day, and has developed activities with a strong connection to the local community.

The Thai delegates were interested to know whether the institution received subsidies from the government; how it acquired land for its facilities, and who was the owner of its properties. In response, representatives from Tokyo Kosaien stressed that the center received absolutely no financial assistance from the government, and that as a private-sector institution it operated as an entirely independent entity.

The participants had an opportunity to have a 2-hour tour within Kosaien's various facilities, receiving an overview and interacting with clients, whose average age is over 80. The visitors were especially interested in how the cost of the different programs would be covered and how it was connected to Japan's pension and nursing care insurance schemes. Kosaien's staff provided information to some very specific questions across a wide range of subjects.

On the walls of Kosaien's child day-care center, the visitors encountered photos of Hanako that was the first Asian elephant donated by Thailand to Japan after the Second World War. Before she passed away on 26 May 2016 at Inokashira Park Zoo in Musashino City, Hanako went on to be the longest elephant ever held by a zoo in Japan. Hanako's story spurred a lively conversation on the friendship between Japan and Thailand.

The participants from Thailand expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to learn about the Japanese measure on aging population, by being able to see an actual elderly nursing care facility in Japan in such detail. They also expressed their intention to put what they had learned to good use in discussions at the National Senate's Public Health Committee.

