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Written statement* submitted by the Japanese Workers' Committee for Human Rights (JWCHR), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[2 March 2006]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Human Rights of Older Persons in Critical Situation in Japan Advocacy of National Minimum Pension System

Testimonies of Older Persons

International Covenant on Economic, social and Cultural Rights prescribes in its Article 9 "the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance." A great number of older persons in Japan, however, live in painful situations because of inadequacy of social security.

A woman of age 62 said, "My husband was a fishmonger and paid contribution for National Basic Pension for 42 years. But he died before he received any pension benefits. I got a lump sum of 50 thousand yen, which didn't even suffice the funeral cost. National Basic Pension does not provide any survivors' pension unless one has children under 18. I am furious. I want my husband's contributions back. I myself have pension benefits, but only 18,000 yen a month. I can't go to see doctors even when I am sick. I am working whatever work there is to survive. When I can't work any more, I hope I will be helped by welfare benefit."

Another woman of age 79 said, "My pension is 51,400 yen a month. This is all I can rely on to live. As the benefit is too little, I receive welfare benefit about 30,000 yen a month. I look for bargain sales all around the town. I don't put on the light even when it gets dark and I only put on TV. When I use bath, I try to use water as little as possible. When I use toilet, I don't flush water except once for five times. When there are social ceremonies like funerals, I feel very much embarrassed because I can't offer obituary gifts. I want to live like ordinary human beings."

These are only the examples of millions of older persons in Japan. TVs and News Papers report day after day that an old husband kills his wife and after that kills himself because he can not give daily care for his invalid wife any more. They also report that criminal offenses by old people, such as shoplifting, stealing, and robbery, are shooting up in recent years.

As a result of successive reforms of Medical Care Insurance System, Long-term Care Insurance System and Pension System, burdens on older persons have got heavier and heavier, making older persons' lives extremely difficult.

Public Pension Systems

The public pension system in Japan consists of three schemes. The first scheme is the National Basic Pension Scheme by which every person aged 20 and over is supposed to be covered. The source of revenue is contributions from insured persons and from national treasury. In addition to the National Basic Pension, employed workers (usually only regular workers) are covered by income-related Employees' Pension Scheme. The self-employed persons, farmers, workers in informal sections and dependent wives receive only National Basic Pension benefits when they get old. The monthly amount is 66,000 yen (471 euro) in full, and 46,000 yen (329 euro) in average. The amount is hardly enough to afford basic daily needs for older persons. The rough number of the old persons aged 65

and over that have only national basic pension amounts amount to 9.12 million (in 2004) and that is 48 percent of the total recipients of the public pension in Japan.

The Older Persons without Pension Are Increasing

The more serious problem is that the older persons without pension eligibility are increasing. In Japan people don't have eligibility of pension unless they pay contributions for at least 25 years. The requirement for eligibility is very harsh, creating nearly one million people over 65 without pension. Category 1 Insured Persons are obliged to pay contributions whether or how much they earn. It is natural that the people with low income tend to fall into arrears. Exemption from paying contributions requires strict conditions and even if people are exempted from paying contributions, they will receive less benefit because of exemption in later years.

Gender Gap in Pension Benefits

Another problem is the gender gap in pension benefits. The average monthly benefit of Employees' Pension Scheme is 193,600 yen (1382 euro) for men and 112,600 yen (804 euro) for women (these figures are for those with more than 20 years contribution-paid periods.) If we include Category 3 women, dependent wives and the women who have worked in informal sections, the pension gap would be even greater than this.

The gender gap reflects the overall sexual discrimination and the low status of women. Women are often relegated to quit jobs when they get married or have children. The poor surroundings of raising children including shortage of day care centers and long working hours also make women choose to quit jobs. After having children, women often work in unstable and temporary jobs. Unstable and temporary jobs take up 51.6 percent of all women's jobs. All these situations make women's pension far smaller than men.

Pension Systems "Getting Hollow Inside"

The percentage of the people paying contributions in National Basic Pension Scheme had dropped year by year since 1993, and it became 62.8 percent in 2002. Especially young people pay contributions less and less. In 2004, among 4.38 million people who are under 24 and who are obliged to pay National Basic Pension Contribution, only 1.11 million people actually pay contributions, 1.80 million people exempted and 1.13 million people simply not paying for two years. These people are bound to receive no pension benefits in future, if the situation does not change.

The arrears of paying contributions reflect the unstable employment status in which many young men are forced to be. The jobless rate of young people in twenties amounts around 10 percent, and that is the twice the total rate. Those who earn less than one million yen (714 euro) take up 56.2 percent of the total temporary workers, and those who earn less than two million yen (1428 euro) take up 87.3 percent.

2004 Pension Reform

The Japanese Government reformed public pension systems in 2004, but the reform did not improve the situation of older persons, rather it made worse. The main points of the reform are to raise the contributions yearly until 2017, and to cut down the benefits level according to both the decrease in work force and the growth of the average life span. The government estimated that the benefits level will drop about 15 percent both in the National Basic Pension and the Employees' Pension. As for women's pension, benefits splitting system on divorce and also benefits splitting system for the years of the dependent wife were introduced. These measures are hardly enough to improve the gender gap in pension.

Recommendations of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recommended in its concluding observations to Japanese Government, concerning pension system, that "the state party incorporate a minimum pension into the national pension system," and "the persisting de facto gender inequality in the pension system be remedied to the maximum possible extent."

Japan Pensioners' Union adopted "Advocacy for National Pension System" in its 17th national congress in 2005. Now JPU is campaigning for the realization of the advocacy. The point of the advocacy is that people should be paid the flat rate National Minimum Pension benefits without contribution as the first pillar. The benefits should be enough to cover the cost of basic living expenditure. JPU proposes the amount 80 thousand yen a month. The source of revenue should be secured by redistribution of the nation's wealth, namely, by contributions from the government and big businesses. Japan has GDP of about 500 trillion a year, the second largest one in the world. If we are to use 26 percent of it to secure social security systems as in the average European countries, we would be able to use another 50 trillion yen a year.

Attention to Older Persons' Rights Issues

We sincerely would like to call the attention of the members of the Commission on Human Rights to the issues of Older Persons' human rights. In globalization of economy, the North-South differentials now originate within a country. The income differentials are growing bigger, and older persons are rapidly turning into one of the most vulnerable groups. We need to expand and improve the social security systems before everything else in order to promote and protect human rights of older persons.

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