

Declining Birth Rate Worries Taiwan Government

By Tsai Ting-I

Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior is worried about the nation's declining birth rate, which has hit a record low, and is looking for ways to get couples to have more children.

The ministry's Population Administration Department is going to develop a plan to stimulate the birth rate and slow down the rate at which Taiwan is turning into an ageing society.

"Most of the younger generations just don't want to have babies. We will try to offer certain incentives to encourage the younger generations to have babies," Minister of the Interior Yu

Cheng-hsien said at a press conference.

Statistics show that the total number of births from January to September 2002 was 180,000—a 6 percent drop from the same period the previous year. The ministry is worried that if this trend continues, the birth rate will hit zero in 2031.

For decades, fewer children was a government policy.

In the 1960s the government's population policy was "Two are just right" and the average number of births annually was 400,000. The policy was

changed to "One is not too few; two are just right" in the 1980s.

The ministry has proposed a new slogan as part of its efforts to raise the birth rate—"Two are just right, three is not too many".

Part of the plan is to encourage couples to have more than two children through a combination of tax cuts, government subsidies, public day-care centres for working women and preferential health care for children.

Among the proposals is one to give couples a subsidy of NT\$30,000 (US\$864) for

each additional baby if they already have two children. If implemented, the plan is estimated to cost NT\$12 billion (about US\$346 million) annually.

Couples who have experienced difficulties in conceiving a child would also be targeted in the proposed plan, with a subsidy of NT\$20,000 (US\$576) to help pay for medical expenses.

Families would also be given subsidies to help cover child-raising expenses. Parents with children under five years of age would receive an annual subsidy of NT\$1,800 (US\$51) per child, those with children between six to 11 would receive NT\$2,200 (US\$63) per child and those with children between 12 to 17 would receive NT\$2,600 (US\$749) per child.

The ministry estimates the per-child subsidies would cost the government NT\$1.1 billion (about US\$32 million) a year.

However, even Yu doubts if throwing cash at couples is going to help stop the decline in the birth rate.

"Many young couples don't even want to have a first baby, so how would the NT\$30,000 (US\$864) subsidy plan work?" Yu said.

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