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Surprise increase in Japan birth rate

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tokyo • Births and marriages rose in Japan for the first time in six years in the first half of 2006 due to a recovering economy, but not enough to reverse a dwindling birth rate, an official said yesterday.

Japan's population is on the decline, raising fears of a demographic crisis where a smaller working population supports a mass of pensioners.

Around 550,000 people were born in the first six months this year, up 2.2 per cent compared with the same period last year, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare said in a report.

Marriages also increased for the first time in six years, going up 3.1 per cent with about 370,000 couples tying the knot.

"This rise in the number of married couples can be attributed to Japan's economic recovery," said Mayumi Mitsui, an official at the statistics division of the ministry.

She said the improving economy meant more people had jobs "and therefore they have more economic stability" which encourages marriage. Out-of-wedlock births are rare in Japan compared with other developed countries.

The Nihon Keizai Shimbun business daily said the number of marriages began increasing last summer about the same time that Japanese share prices started a sharp rise.

Yet the rise in the birth rate is too small for Japan to breathe easy, Mitsui said.

"The rise in birth rate was highlighted the more because the number of stillbirths decreased compared with last year, and the death rate also decreased," Mitsui said, noting that last year's death rate was high due to influenza.

Despite the birth rate edging up, the number of births per woman remained at 1.25, the lowest in the past five years. Japan's population in 2005 posted its first decline in peacetime.

A fertility rate of at least 2.07 is needed to maintain the population at current levels, according to the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, part of the health ministry.

Japan has been struggling to find ways to encourage young people to have children and not to consider them to be burdens to their careers, finances and lifestyles.

Japan has tried to make life easier for working mothers. In June, parliament tightened laws against discrimination in response to women's complaints that their jobs disappear once they go on maternity leave.

The government has also started special projects to make raising children easier and less expensive, while improving child-care facilities for working

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parents. But Japan has rejected large-scale immigration.

Naoki Atsumi, a senior researcher at Fujitsu Research Centre, said that the recent strength of the economy would encourage professional women to become mothers.

“An improving economy directly influences the family budget, and even if women want to work, if the economic environment is stable they might be more willing to give motherhood a try,” he said.

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