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Reported child abuse up nearly 26 percent in Japan

Tue Jun 27, 2006 8:21 AM ET

TOKYO (Reuters) - The number of child abuse cases reported in Japan shot up nearly 26 percent in the year to March 2005, topping 30,000 for the first time, with almost half the cases involving preschool children.

Japan had long boasted that its stable family structure made the idea of child abuse inconceivable, but reports of parents starving or beating their children to death have appeared in the news more often in recent years.

According to a white paper released by the government on Tuesday, the number of child abuse cases reported in that year jumped to 33,408 from 26,569 the year before, a rise of 25.7 percent.

A cabinet office official said that while the 2004 tightening of a law aimed at requiring more people to report suspected abuse had contributed to the rise, abuse overall appears to be increasing.

"Given that the number of children has decreased, such a sharp rise shows fairly clearly that abuse in general is still increasing," he added.

Of the cases, 44.5 percent involved physical abuse, while 36.7 percent involved neglect. Children below the age of 6 made up 45.7 percent of the victims.

Prior to 2000, when a law was passed obliging the reporting of suspected abuse, children had largely been treated as their parents' property and barely recognized as individuals in their own right, experts say.

They add that the workaholic habits of many Japanese men contribute to the problem by saddling their wives with the responsibility of child raising, while the increasing isolation of housewives and a breakdown in extended families have also raised stress levels, triggering more abuse.

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