

Japan's foreign residents sound off in unprecedented survey on discrimination

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Rent application denials, Japanese-only recruitment and racist taunts are among the most rampant forms of discrimination faced by foreign residents in Japan, according to the results of the country's first nationwide survey on the issue, released Friday.

The unprecedented survey of 18,500 expats of varying nationalities at the end of last year paints a comprehensive picture of deeply rooted discrimination in Japan as the nation struggles to acclimate to a recent surge in foreign residents and braces for an even greater surge in tourists in the lead-up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

It also represents the latest in a series of fledgling steps taken by Japan to curb racism, following last year's first-ever video analysis by the Justice Ministry of anti-Korea demonstrations and the enactment of a law to eradicate hate speech.

In carrying out the survey, the Justice Ministry commissioned the Center for Human Rights Education and Training, a public foundation, to mail questionnaires to non-Japanese residents in 37 municipalities nationwide. Of the 18,500, 4,252 men and women, or 23.0 percent, provided valid responses. Nationalities included Chinese, South Koreans, Filipinos, Brazilians, Vietnamese and Americans.

The study found that 39.3 percent of 2,044 respondents who applied to rent apartments over the past five years got dismissed because they are not Japanese.

In addition, 41.2 percent said they were turned down because they couldn't secure a Japanese guarantor, while 26.8 percent said they quit their pursuit of a new domicile after being discouraged by a "Japanese-only" prerequisite.

Workplace discrimination appears rife, too.

Of the 4,252 respondents, 2,788 said they had either worked or sought employment in Japan over the past five years. Of them, 25.0 percent said they had experienced being brushed off by potential employers because they are non-Japanese, while 19.6 percent said they were paid lower than their Japanese co-workers.

In a separate question, 29.8 percent of those who responded to the survey said they either "frequently" or "occasionally" heard race-based insults being hurled at them, mostly from strangers (53.3 percent), bosses, co-workers and business partners (38.0 percent) and neighbors (19.3 percent).

Among other examples of unpleasantness mentioned by respondents were "getting weird stares from strangers (31.7 percent)," "being harassed because of poor Japanese-language proficiency (25.1 percent)" and "being avoided in public spaces such as buses, trains and shopping malls (14.9 percent)."

"We believe this survey will serve as key basic data for us to implement policies to protect human rights of foreign nationals in the future," Justice Minister Katsutoshi Kaneda told reporters Friday.

The implementation of the survey is the latest sign that Japan, after years of inaction, is inching toward tackling the problem of racism as the nation becomes increasingly diverse.

A Justice Ministry statistic released last September showed that the

number of permanent as well as middle- and long-term foreign residents in the country hit a record 2.307 million in June, up about 135,000 from a year earlier.

Adding to this is the advent in recent years of jingoistic rallies staged by ultraconservative civic groups on the streets of ethnic Korean neighborhoods, such as Shin-Okubo in Tokyo and Kawasaki, calling for the “massacre” of Koreans they branded as “cockroaches.”

The Justice Ministry’s first probe into hate speech concluded in March last year that 1,152 such demonstrations took place from April 2012 to September 2015 across the nation.

In a related move, an unprecedented hate speech law was enacted last year, highlighting efforts by the central government and municipalities to take steps to eliminate such vitriolic language.

Still, despite being a signatory to the U.N.-designated International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, Japan has for years shied away from enacting a comprehensive law banning racism, based on the position that discrimination here is “not serious enough to legalize punitive measures against the dissemination of racist ideology and risk having a chilling effect on proper speech,” as stated by the Foreign Ministry.

Kim Myungsoo, a professor of sociology at Kansai Gakuin University, hailed the ministry’s latest survey, saying it shed light on the reality of racism inherent to Japan that effectively discredits this government stance.

“The survey publicly confirmed the reality of victimization caused by racism in Japan, which would prevent the government from sticking to its conventional assertion,” said Kim, who himself is an ethnic Korean resident. “I believe the government is ready to change its position.”

Hiroshi Tanaka, a professor emeritus at Hitotsubashi University, said the government has much to learn from the results of this survey, noting an overwhelming 85.3 percent of the respondents said they were not aware of human rights consultation services made available by regional branches of the Justice Ministry.

But a sad irony, he pointed out, plagues these services in the first place, with foreign nationals effectively disqualified from becoming counselors there due to a law that makes having Japanese nationality a prerequisite for the post.