

Group seeks 'kisha club' shutdown

By JUN HONGO

Staff writer

A group of intellectuals including academics and journalists called Monday on the government and major news associations to open news conferences to a wider spectrum of media, saying the closed nature of the ministries' press club system has compromised the public's right to know.

"We demand unrestricted access to news conferences and conference rooms," journalist Masayuki Takada, one of the organizers of Kaiken Kaihou wo Motomeru Kai (Meeting to Open News Conferences), said.

Opening news conferences to all media outlets would not only improve the quality of journalism but also cultivate true democracy and freedom of speech in Japan, the group said in a statement.

The government restricts access to its news conferences by requiring journalists to have "press club memberships" in each ministry. These "kisha club" memberships are provided exclusively to major domestic newspapers, TV stations and wire services but seldom to others.

The Democratic Party of Japan has been trying to end the practice. Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama last month gave some 40 journalists — including freelancers and representatives of foreign media organizations and Web-based news sites, the OK to attend his news conferences.

A handful of Cabinet members, including Foreign Minister Katsuya Okada, have also admitted outsiders to their briefings.

But the Kaiken Kaihou wo Motomeru Kai said these developments are far from satisfactory because the process remains selective. The group said it will pressure the access-hungry media conglomerates that effectively run kisha clubs to abandon the practice.

Calling the system "a cartel of news reporting," the group demanded that freelancers from nonmainstream media outlets be given access to all information provided by the government and be allowed to attend the "kondan," or off-the-record meetings with senior officials where inside information is often passed to the media.

"This is about major media groups wanting to hold on to their privileges and their exclusive access to information," journalist Hajime Kitamura said.

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