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The Daily Yomiuri(Tokyo)

July 11, 2006 Tuesday

SECTION: Pg. 3

LENGTH: 404 words

HEADLINE: Let's build a bright future for youth

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BODY:

The theme for this year's World Population Day, "Young People," focuses attention on the unique challenges faced by the burgeoning ranks of the young in our societies. Today, nearly half the world's population--more than 3 billion people--are under the age of 25. They represent the largest cohort of young people in human history, and far too many among them confront bleak prospects.

No matter where they are born, the lives of young people are shaped by forces beyond their control--the prevalence of poverty, the incidence of crime, the availability of education and training, opportunities for decent employment, and access to affordable health services.

Yet today's young men and women are also more aware of the lives led by their counterparts across the world. As a result, many of them are demanding action to narrow the gap between rich and poor, and measures to increase opportunities for all.

There is a clear need to answer their call. After all, providing for youth is not just a moral obligation, it is a compelling economic necessity.

Study after study has shown the benefits--to the young and to their communities--of investing in education, reproductive health, job skills and employment opportunities for young people. Such returns are especially great in the case of girls. Healthy, educated and informed young women are better prepared to participate fully in society and contribute to the life of their communities.

Sexual and reproductive health information and services are a particularly important--though often neglected--pillar of youth empowerment. Their availability can enable young men and women to make responsible and informed choices to protect themselves. It can help the global fight against AIDS, and it can allow the young to make better decisions about starting families.

The decisions young people make will shape our world and the prospects of future generations. Yet underinvestment in the young means that they often lack the resources, training or information to act. Governments must inevitably lead the way in addressing this failing. But all of us--policy makers, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens--should contribute in ways both large and small.

On this World Population Day, let us all reaffirm our determination to promote the human rights and well-being of young people, and work with them to build a better world for all.

Annan is secretary general of the United Nations.

LOAD-DATE: July 10, 2006