

Japan demographic woes deepen as birth rate hits record low

By Kiyoshi Takenaka

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[1/2] Nursery school children take a nap at Hinagiku nursery in Moriyama, western Japan May 27, 2008. REUTERS/Yuriko Nakao/File Photo

TOKYO, June 2 (Reuters) - Japan's birth rate declined for the seventh consecutive year in 2022 to a record low, the health ministry said on Friday,

underscoring the sense of crisis gripping the country as the population shrinks and ages rapidly.

The fertility rate, or the average number of children born to a woman in her lifetime, was 1.2565. That compares with the previous low of 1.2601 posted in 2005 and is far below the rate of 2.07 considered necessary to maintain a stable population.

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Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has made arresting the country's sliding birth rate a top priority and his government, despite high levels of debt, plans to earmark spending of 3.5 trillion yen (\$25 billion) a year on child care and other measures to support parents.

"The youth population will start decreasing drastically in the 2030s. The period of time until then is our last chance to reverse the trend of dwindling births," he said this week while visiting a daycare facility.

The pandemic has exacerbated Japan's demographic challenges, with fewer marriages in recent years contributing to fewer births and COVID-19 partly responsible for more deaths.

The number of newborns in Japan slid 5% to 770,747 last year, a new low, while the number of deaths shot 9% higher to a record 1.57 million, the data showed. More than 47,000 deaths in Japan last year were caused by the coronavirus pandemic.