

Big plastic user Japan hopes to fight waste

By Alex Barreira and Haruka Nuga
The Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan has a plastic problem.

In a country where cleanliness and neat packaging have long been considered good service, almost everything, from single bananas to individual pieces of vegetables, pastries, pens, and cosmetics is sold plastic-wrapped.

But as world leaders descended on Osaka for the two-day G-20 summit, Japan is attempting to become a leader in environmental policy at the same time it plays catch-up with countries that already have well-defined goals in place.

In the months leading up to the G-20 summit, Japanese officials delivered full-throated endorsements of future bans on single-use plastics, beach cleanup efforts, and more research into alternatives such as bioplastics. The problem is, the enforcement and timing of the directives have yet to match measures already in place in the European Union (EU) — including sweeping legislation passed earlier this year that will ban single-use plastic in all member states by 2021.

Just last summer, Japan was criticized for failing to sign the G-7 Plastics Charter, the only country to do so besides the United States.

At a mid-June meeting of G-20 environmental ministers in Karuizawa, Japan brokered an agreement to begin sharing best practices and establishing standards for tracking marine plastic waste, but stopped short of setting numerical goals or a timeline for progress.

Japan is the world's No. 2 consumer of single-use plastic packaging per person — the United States is No. 1 — according to a 2018 U.N. Environment Program report. G-20 nations produce half the world's plastic waste, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who chaired the summit, has made fixing the problem a top initiative, both at the summit and in



PLASTIC PROBLEM. A plastic recycling company worker sorts plastic bottles collected for processing at Tokyo Petbottle Recycle Co., Ltd, in Tokyo. Japan has a plastic problem. In a country where cleanliness and neat packaging have long been considered good service, many items are sold with plastic wrapping. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File)

After China stopped accepting plastic imports in 2017, several Southeast Asian nations became new targets, but some countries, including Malaysia and the Philippines, are now turning the shipments back. They accuse rich countries of pushing their garbage onto poorer nations.

Officials in Japan have scrambled to find a new home for the country's used plastic by establishing a 1.9 billion yen (\$18 million) emergency fund over the past two years and asking local authorities and waste handlers to shoulder additional loads for recycling and incineration. Japan's plastic waste exports last year totalled 1 million tons, according to trade statistics, but experts say the decline could be linked to an increase in illegal exports or stockpiles at garbage dumps.

"We are trying to develop more domestic plastic recycling facilities and capabilities, but it takes some time," said Hiroshi Ono, an Environment Ministry official.

At a factory on Tokyo Bay, one of more than a dozen operated by plastic recycling company Kyoei Industry Co., about 35 tons of PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles are processed daily. They come in hundreds of bales, each wrapped in plastic, and are then unravelled, sorted, pulverized, heated, and minced. Next they're turned into fine pellets and reborn as egg cartons, school uniforms, soccer jerseys, and other sports equipment, as well as PET bottles, returning to store shelves, said company president Eiichi Furusawa.

"Even if we wanted to (export plastic waste), no country welcomes imports now," Furusawa said. "We think we need to circulate plastic domestically."

Associated Press writer Mari Yamaguchi contributed to this report.

Japan.

But Japanese promotional efforts, such as crafting next year's Tokyo Olympic medals and champion podiums from recovered metals and plastics, have failed to impress experts who say that Japan cannot recycle its way out of a global plastic waste crisis, and that the country instead needs to focus on reducing plastic at the earlier end of the supply chain.

"What we are asking for is the reduction of plastic produced in the first place," said Mageswari Sangaralingam, a Malaysia-based waste management expert.

There are signs that Japan is beginning to recognize its own difficulties.

Trade minister Hiroshige Seko announced at the G-20 environment ministers' meeting plans for a law that will require retailers to charge fees for plastic shopping bags as early as next April.

Seven & i Holdings Co., the Japanese operator of 7-Eleven convenience stores, announced a plan in May to replace all plastic shopping bags with paper by 2030 and all plastic packaging with paper, biodegradable, or other reusable materials at its nearly 21,000 stores nationwide.

Those goals are more ambitious than the government's 2030 target for a 25% reduction in single-use plastic.

Selected 7-Eleven stores near Tokyo, including one at Yokohama, have started offering paper bags instead of plastic. Saemi Nakamura, a customer, said the change is welcome.

"The world is talking about the use of plastic not being good. I think paper bags are better," Nakamura said.

Another convenience store chain, Ministop, began charging 3 yen (3 cents) per plastic shopping bag in an experiment at two stores in Chiba, near Tokyo, which is to be expanded to about 40 outlets by early 2020.

But plastic shopping bags and packaging are only a small part of the overall plastic waste problem, experts say. As much as 12.7 million tons of plastic waste end up in the ocean each year, of which up to 60,000 tons comes from Japan, according a study cited by the country's Environment Ministry.

Japan is also the world's No. 2 exporter of plastic waste. It used to export about 1.5 million tons per year, mainly to China.

Over 40% of newly elected Indian lawmakers facing charges

By Ashok Sharma
The Associated Press

NEW DELHI — India's recent national election delivered a historic victory to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist party, but also exposed the influence of money, power, and questionable morality on the world's largest democracy.

Nearly 43% of the new members of the lower house of parliament that convened in June for the first time since the election won despite facing criminal charges. More than a quarter of those relate to rape, murder, or attempted murder, according to a report by the civic group Association of Democratic Reforms.

The loophole that allows them to take office is that they have not been convicted — in part because the Indian legal system has a huge backlog of an estimated 30 million

cases and trials often last decades. When asked about the charges against them, they invariably accuse a political rival of framing them.

Since such rivalries often lead to false accusations, the main political parties say it would be unfair to bar people from contesting elections unless they have been convicted by a court.

Under existing laws, only those who have been sentenced to prison for two years or more can be barred from elections.

Having members of parliament with criminal backgrounds is not a new phenomenon in India, but despite Modi's campaign vow in 2014 to clean up corruption and the influence of money in politics, the problem appears to be only growing worse.

In the 2004 national election, the percentage of candidates with pending criminal cases was 24%, which rose to 33% in 2009, 34% in 2014, and 43% this year, said Shahabuddin Y. Quraishi, a former chief election commissioner.

The Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) found that 116 of the 303 lawmakers from Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party elected in May face criminal charges, including one for alleged terrorism.

Pragya Singh Thakur, who won a seat in Bhopal in central India, is awaiting trial in connection with a 2008 explosion in Malegaon in western India that killed seven people.

Twenty-nine of the opposition congress party's 52 lawmakers face serious charges.

"This trend has been growing in India, leaving no political party untouched. We need to educate voters not to elect these people," said Jagdeep S. Chhokar, ADR's founder.

"What the Indian state has been unable to provide, strongmen promise to deliver to people in their area of influence, using gun and money power," said Lennin Rasghuvanshi, a coordinator with the People's Union for Civil Liberties.

Starting in the 1960s and '70s, some Indian politicians began turning to the criminal underworld for cash to win

votes.

"In due course, the criminals started thinking that these politicians were winning because of their money or crimes so why shouldn't they become lawmakers themselves? If they are people running from the police, they know that when they became lawmakers, the same police will protect them," Quraishi said.

In Uttar Pradesh state in northern Indian, former mafia don Mukhtar Ansari has been elected to the state assembly five times despite more than 40 criminal cases pending against him, including murder.

Another don-turned-politician, Hari Shankar Tiwari, also of Uttar Pradesh, has been a member of the legislative assembly for 23 years, even winning an election while being detained on murder charges.

During the campaign, Election Commission officials and government agencies seized mountains of cash, alcohol, gold and silver, *saris*, and expensive watches in the offices of political parties that were intended as gifts in exchange for votes.

The total value of the seized goods was \$500 million, including \$120 million in cash — nearly three times what was found in the 2014 general election, according to the Election Commission.

Analysts say political parties seem to prize electability over ethics.

"They think that people with criminal backgrounds have more chances to win because of their money and muscle power," Qureshi said.

In the days of paper ballots before electronic voting machines were introduced, gangs would use brute force to take over polling stations to rig the vote.

One reason for the increasing number of criminal suspects going into politics is the sheer cost of elections. In the general election that concluded in May, political parties and candidates are estimated to have spent about \$8.65 billion. That's double the amount in the 2014 election, according to a report by the Center for Media Studies in New Delhi.

The report said the Bharatiya Janata Party was the

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