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Panel formed to ease burden on Emperor

Six-member body to produce report amid looming issue of desire to step aside

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The government said Friday that a six-member advisory panel was established to draft a report on how to reduce the public duties of Emperor Akihito, but the politically sensitive issue of whether he should be allowed to abdicate due to advanced age is now expected to become part of its agenda.

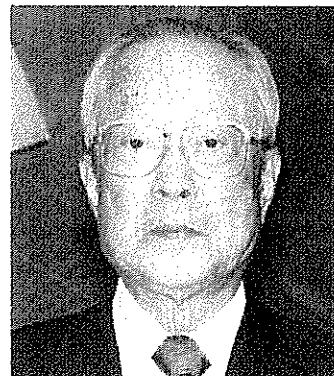
In a rare televised speech on Aug. 8, the 82-year-old Emperor expressed his wish to step aside in the near future to make way for Crown Prince Naruhito to assume the Chrysanthemum Throne. His remarks sparked a debate over the Imperial House Law, which

does not allow an emperor to abdicate according to his own free will.

The panel, which is devoid of experts on the Imperial family, will hold its first meeting in mid-October, with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe most likely in attendance, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga told a news conference.

No deadline will be set for the panel's report because the government wants the members to discuss the issue "in a quiet environment with no prejudgments," Suga said.

The chief cabinet secretary emphasized that the issues to be discussed are "related to the foundation of the state and extremely important."



Takashi Imai KYODO

The panel does not include specialists on the history of the Imperial family or on matters related to the Imperial House Law as its main function will apparently be to study experts' views and form a consensus.

The government chose the members based on their ability to "organize various views

and discuss and explain them to the public," Suga said.

The panel will thus hold hearings to let experts on Imperial issues express their views for reflection in the final report, Suga said.

The approach taken by the government in tackling this sensitive issue appears to put priority on forming a consensus rather than drawing attention to noted experts who could split the group.

Conservative politicians and scholars maintain that an emperor should not be allowed to quit under his own volition because it could destabilize the Imperial system over the long run.

This argument has made the abdication question a very sensitive issue in Abe's Cabinet because many of its key supporters are nationalistic con-

servatives.

"It is true opinions are divided among experts," Suga admitted at the news conference.

The six members are Takashi Imai, chairman emeritus of the Japan Business Federation, the influential business lobby better known as Keidanren; Junko Obata, a Sophia Law School professor and expert on administrative law; Atsushi Seike, president of Keio University and a scholar on labor economy studies; Takashi Mikuriya, professor emeritus of politics at the University of Tokyo; Midori Miyazaki, former TV broadcaster and professor at Chiba University of Commerce; and Masayuki Yamachi, professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo and a noted expert on Islamic studies.