

'My number' is dangerous

The Diet on May 24 enacted a bill to launch the "My Number" system under which an ID number will be assigned to every resident, Japanese or foreign, and a photo-ID card with an embedded electronic data chip will be issued to those who apply for one.

It is deplorable that the Diet passed the bill without fully discussing problems that could arise with the introduction of the system, whose initial investment requires some ¥270 billion.

The government claims that the ID number system, which would be used mainly for taxation and social security purposes, would enhance fairness in taxation and efficiency in the distribution of social welfare resources. But the possibility exists that the system will do little more than enable the state to exercise greater control over citizens while raising the risk of people's personal information being leaked or stolen.

Initially the law limits the use of the ID system to taxation, social security services and measures dealing with natural disasters. But the law calls for considering the expansion of the use of the system three years after the system has started.

There is talk of permitting the private sector to use the ID system. This should be strictly prohibited as there is no perfect method to prevent the leakage or theft of personal data, which would cause serious damage to those whose privacy has been compromised.

Under the My Number system, an ID number will be assigned to each resident. The permanent nature of the number is troubling as it makes it easier for identity theft to take place.

The government plans to notify each citizen of his or her ID

number by October 2015. The ID card system will start to be used in January 2016. It will enable the public sector to keep tabs on citizens' payments of income tax and resident tax as well as information related to their pension, medical and nursing-care services and other social security services.

For citizens, the procedures related to tax payments and receipt of social security benefits will become simplified. But potential problems of the ID system should not be ignored.

In addition to the leakage of personal information, there is the danger of identity theft. Someone may pose as the valid cardholder and commit fraudulent acts — such as purchasing expensive articles or taking out loans. Such crimes are taking place in the United States, northern European countries and South Korea, where similar ID systems are in effect.

It is reported that damage caused by identity theft in the U.S. alone amounts to \$50 billion a year. As a result, Congress has held public hearings to discuss possible changes to the U.S. Social Security number system.

For these reasons, the Japanese government should not expand the use of the ID number system, and the system should never contain information about a person's medical history and genetic makeup.

Given the potential problems associated with the deeply flawed My Number system, it might end up primarily benefiting only the IT industry — which stands to make handsome profits through its implementation and estimated ¥40 billion annual maintenance costs — rather than the public.