

# Abe-led panel adopts new visa plan to accept 500,000 low-skilled laborers by 2025

BY REIJI YOSHIDA



Challenged by the ongoing population crisis, Japan may be finally and quietly trying to change its strict immigration policy to accept more low-skilled foreign laborers.

On Friday, the Council on Economic and Fiscal Policy, which is chaired by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, adopted a set of immigration policies for the creation of a new visa status for non-professional foreign laborers.

By 2025, Abe's government is reportedly considering letting as many as 500,000 relatively low-skilled laborers enter the country to work in five industrial sectors that have been suffering from an acute labor shortage, namely in the construction, agriculture, nursing, hotel and ship-building industries.

But Yoshio Kimura, chairman of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's special committee on issues related to foreign workers, said the number is not enough. Two years ago, the committee called for allowing more than 900,000 new foreign laborers be let in.

"Some 500,000 is not enough at all. Some people who don't know about the reality (of the Japanese economy) must have just made up that figure," Kimura told The Japan Times during an interview earlier this week.

"Over the next 100 years, Japan's population will become something like 40 million (from the current 126 million). We definitely need foreign workers. We need young people who can support elderly people," he said.

Still, Kimura has praised the council's new policy as a potential milestone. The outline of the council's new visa system is largely based on a report published by Kimura's committee on May 24, 2016.

Kimura said he believes lawmakers supporting the committee's proposal have now become "a majority" among those within the LDP, as they have witnessed the acute labor shortage that has plagued numerous Japanese firms. "To be honest, some right-leaning (LDP members) are still opposed. But they say so by intuition, not looking at reality," he said.

For a long time Japan has officially banned the entry of unskilled foreign workers despite its rapidly shrinking working-age population.

The country, however, has in fact already allowed in hundreds of thousands of such migrant workers by providing them with student visas and “technical intern trainee” status, a category often criticized as a back-door measure to help laborer-short Japanese businesses — in particular small firms.

Under the panel's new policy, the government now plans to create a new five-year visa category for non-professional foreign workers. Applicants for the new visa status will need to pass certain skill tests and have some degree of Japanese language proficiency to be able to receive the new five-year visas. The immigration authority, meanwhile, plans to exempt technical trainees from those tests if they have already worked in Japan for three years.

If they pass additional tests during the five-year period the limit on their period of stay will be removed, and some family members will also be permitted to come and live in Japan.

The lengthy processes will eventually give many — possibly hundreds of thousands — technical trainees in Japan an opportunity to apply for a visa that will then allow them to reside here as long-term residents.

As of October last year, 1.28 million foreigners holding legitimate visas were working in Japan, including 257,788 intern trainees, mostly from other Asian countries such as Vietnam, China, the Philippines and Indonesia.

For the government to carry out this plan, the Diet's endorsement will still be needed to enact a bill enabling the nation's immigration laws to be revised.

Details of the new visa system — including what kinds of tests applicants must pass — have yet to be decided, government officials said.

Meanwhile, Friday's report clearly declared the new visa system as “not an immigration policy,” and that foreign laborers under the system will never officially be referred to as “immigrants.”

Hisashi Yamada, an economist at Tokyo-based think tank Japan Research Institute, pointed out that the use of the word “immigration” is still politically taboo among Japanese politicians.

“In Japan, the word ‘immigrants’ still carries very politically negative connotations,” he said.

Yamada said that allowing more foreign workers into the country, as called for in Friday's report, is definitely needed in order to boost the nation's economy over the long term.

But Friday's report did not explain the new visa system in detail, and it did not discuss any concrete measures to help foreign laborers integrate into local communities.

If Japan rushes to accept a large number of foreign workers at the same time, it could create “friction” in some local communities and could eventually give rise to a political movement opposed to accepting more immigrants, Yamada warned.

“Whether the new policy will turn out to be a turning point in Japan's immigration policy or just pie in the sky all depends on specific details of how the system will be actually built up,” he said.

Masahiko Shibayama, director-general of Kimura's labor issues committee of the LDP, said the introduction of foreign workers into Japan should be “sustainable” and that a “step-by-step” approach should be adopted.

In fact, a lengthy process will still be required for foreign workers to apply for and eventually receive a stable resident status under the envisioned new visa system.

“Some people overseas may say the whole process should be sped up more, but (the council's policy) is not very different from our proposals two years ago,” Shibayama said.

“You can say this is one step. The key word should be sustainability,” he said.