

How Japan's Labor Trainee Program Hurts Relations With Vietnam

If Japan intends to keep relations warm with Vietnam, the government needs to scrap the long-troubled TITP, which stands accused of enabling labor rights abuses.

By Serena Ford

In the blossoming bilateral relationship between Japan and Vietnam, there is a thorn.

The Technical Intern Trainee Program (TITP) – ostensibly a Japanese initiative to upskill individuals from neighboring, developing countries – has continuously attracted international condemnation for being a “back-door” passage for cheap labor migration into Japan, in order to counter the country’s lack of workers in low-skilled economic sectors.

Vietnamese are now the fastest growing group of foreigners in Japan, numbering 410,000 in 2019 and they account for almost half of the trainees in the TITP program.

The program has repeatedly come under fire by Japanese activist groups, the U.S. State Department, and the United Nations for its continual reports of human rights abuses and work-related deaths. Indeed, since 2014 at least 140 Vietnamese have died in Japan, with the vast majority of them entering Japan as trainees.

The TITP program was set up formally in 1993, with the premise that Japan would aid in the industrial development of its neighbors through skills transfer to trainees from these developing countries. Trainees, then, were always expected to leave Japan eventually.

By choosing to name these new arrivals “trainees” and not migrant workers, Japanese politicians addressed the labor shortage – conveniently sidestepping potential resistance from more hardline anti-immigration voters – while framing it as part of their long-standing, regional aid development activities.

For incoming workers, a trainee stint presented a means of generating more capital than they could in their own countries, with the benefit of high-quality Japanese training to increase their employability, productivity, and work mobility at home.

But all was not as it seemed.

Not only did TITP prove itself to be almost completely ineffectual in the upskilling of trainees for their return home – in terms of acquiring skills that could not be learned in countries of origin – but the program itself was neglectfully run. Poor oversight of the Japanese companies recruiting workers led to grim human rights abuses endured by many trainees.

As many as 70.8 percent of companies investigated in a Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare report were in violation of labor standards, out of 5,966 Japanese companies investigated. The Ministry of Justice also revealed in an official press release that 171 trainees had died while on the program between 2012 and 2017 – although activists say this number is just the tip of the iceberg.

By this point, it was impossible for Japan to continue insisting TITP was an upskilling initiative. Even the head of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party’s labor committee, Kimura Yoshio, told the New York Times, “The system is like calling a crow white...What we’re really doing is importing labor.”

The Japanese government has since set up a watchdog organization, the Organization for Technical Intern Training (OTIT) to audit and investigate Japanese companies that recruit trainees, and several reforms were made to ensure TITP trainees had a right to Japan’s minimum wage and other labor protections.

Japan also signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with most of the countries who send trainees – including Vietnam in 2017. Both countries committed to protecting the rights and legitimate benefits of Vietnamese technical intern trainees during their stay in Japan.

After many years of sitting at Tier 2 status in the eyes of the U.S. State Department, Japan finally earned a Tier 1 position in the June 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report thanks to these efforts.

Unfortunately, this success was very short lived.

By the end of 2018 – some time after the memorandum was signed – 9,052 technical trainees had fled from their workplaces, with more than half of these coming from Vietnam. Staffed by just 350 workers, the OTIT was not equipped to deal with the sheer volume of workplace abuse complaints by trainees, in a program in which the number of participants continues to grow.

A lack of political will or support for auditing programs has left these issues unaddressed. Not only did Japan fail to identify a single case of forced labor in the TITP program in 2020, but it never has to date, despite overwhelming reports of this from trainees across the board. This year Japan has been downgraded once again to Tier 2 for its failure to address human rights issues in the TITP program.

While this trainee program might have served a political purpose domestically – in addressing a labor shortage while keeping anti-immigration voters happy – the strain it puts on Japan-Vietnam relations has already had an impact.

When a particularly morbid case emerged in 2018, involving four Vietnamese TITP trainees who were made to clean up nuclear contamination in Fukushima without sufficient protection by their Japanese company, the Vietnamese embassy stepped in. The ambassador encouraged activists to mention the Vietnamese governmental support for victims when making a case to the Japanese government.

At the G-20 Summit in Osaka last year, Vietnam's Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc asked then-Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo to do something about the unfavorable conditions for Vietnamese people living and working in Japan. The problem is already on Hanoi's radar and should be treated with caution.

Another mystery in the continued running of TITP is the fact that Abe's new immigration scheme – effective from April last year and aiming to attract an increase of 345,000 foreign “semi-skilled workers” to Japan – provides an above-board system for admission and employment of foreign laborers, which the TITP has repeatedly failed to do.

A Kyodo News Poll conducted just before the immigration bill was passed found that 51.3 percent of Japanese people supported increased immigration, citing the struggle with labor shortages endemic to the country. Many believe approval for immigration will increase as Japanese face the pressures of an aging society more directly in coming years.

With this alternative immigration pathway, increasing tolerance of foreign laborers in Japan generally, and Japan's proven inability to rectify the outstanding human rights issues posed by the TITP, there is absolutely no reason why the Japanese government should continue running its trainee program. Japan is already facing competition in attracting foreign labor as its neighbors China, Taiwan, and South Korea also grapple with aging societies.

New Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide cannot risk further harm to the bilateral relationship with Vietnam posed by TITP failures. Having chosen Vietnam as a destination in his first trip abroad, let's hope Suga intends to finally retire this program for good.

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