

Vietnamese migrant workers fall sharply amid COVID-19 pandemic

Japan, key recipient, has closed borders to foreigners since mid-January

TOMOYA ONISHI

HANOI -- The number of Vietnamese migrant workers has fallen sharply as recipient countries continue to keep their borders closed to foreigners because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government in Hanoi had planned to send 500,000 workers overseas in the five years through 2025, but analysts now think that number is too high.

In the first three months of this year, around 10,000 Vietnamese workers arrived in Taiwan and about 18,000 workers went to Japan, according to data from the Vietnam Association of Manpower Supply.

Japan has banned the entry of all nonresident foreign nationals since mid-January as it battles another wave of coronavirus infections. This will have an impact on its Technical Intern Training Program which provides employment opportunities for foreign nationals in a country facing a severe labor shortage, in part due to an aging population.

Vietnam is the biggest supplier of technical interns in Japan. Currently, around 200,000 Vietnamese live and work there as technical interns in a wide range of sectors, including agriculture, construction and manufacturing.

The program was also designed to transfer skills to developing countries but in reality, many Japanese companies consider the foreign interns simply as cheap labor.

Japan's entry restrictions have also hit the earnings of companies that send Vietnamese technical interns to the country and a growing number of such organizations are suspending their business there.

Hanoi Link Service used to send its workers mainly to Japan but Chairman To Tien Nghia said recently that the company is now thinking about focusing on other countries. Japan had been an attractive destination given higher wages there. While a Vietnamese worker in Japan earns an average of \$1,200 to \$1,400 a month, those in Taiwan make only \$700 to \$800.

Vietnam has fallen behind in conducting skills and language tests for its workers keen to take advantage of Japan's new visa program for specified skilled workers. (Photo by Tomoya Onishi)

Yet, even before the pandemic, Vietnam was already struggling to send workers to Japan under the latter's new visa program for specified skilled workers launched in April 2019 for 14 sectors that were facing labor shortages. This was because Vietnam was late in conducting skills and language tests, required by Japan, for its prospective workers, falling behind many Asian countries, including the Philippines that started them as much as two years earlier.

But even during pandemic-hit 2020 when the number of Vietnamese migrant workers halved to around 38,000, Japan still had the highest figure in the region. Taiwan hosted 34,000 Vietnamese migrant workers and South Korea 1,300 in that year.

Following Japan, Taiwan banned all nonresident foreign nationals on May 19 in the face of surging infections. Vietnam's Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs plans to send 90,000 workers overseas in 2021 -- up nearly 10,000 from the previous year -- but the downward trend will likely continue.

As the number of Vietnam's migrant workers continues to decrease, the country's economy is also suffering. According to local media, around 600,000 Vietnamese work abroad, with remittances from migrant workers reaching at least \$4 billion dollars annually. This is set to decrease as the number of migrant workers contract