Japan govt to tackle ‘taboo’ of expanding foreign labour force

Shrinking population biggest challenge for economy

TOYKO, March 3. (REUTERS) Japan’s ruling party kicks off a debate this month on whether to expand the pool of foreign workers to cope with a greying, shrinking population, challenging a longstanding “taboo” on immigration, said the head of a new party panel said on Thursday.

With demand for labour at its highest in 25 years, firms such as Subaru car maker Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd are turning to what is essentially a system of back-door immigration.

This would mean abolishing the laws that make it virtually impossible for women and children to stay in the country beyond the legal limit of five years.

“The question is how to compute an equation,” said Koichi Kato, a member of the Liberal Democratic Party, chairman of a panel that is reviewing immigration laws.

“The biggest problem for Japan’s economic growth is the shrinking population. In order to increase the size of the workforce, people and social security measures are necessary,” Kato said in an interview.

With 65 or older, we talk about how many people are entering any room as we work,” he said, adding that he expected some LDP members to oppose the proposal.

Kato’s panel made at least 30 suggestions, or about 1.3 percent, of Japan’s population, including about 700,000 children born to foreign workers.

It was unclear, however, if the panel’s recommendations would see the light of day in government’s term residence rather than short-term stays, a sign of how sensitive the topic is even in a nation that prizes its cultural and historical identity.

“May this not be appropriate before the upper house election,” Kato said.

The bill is not for now.

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