

German govt plans to relax rules to attract foreign workers

AFP, Berlin
Worker-starved Germany plans to ease immigration rules to attract foreign jobseekers and replenish its fast ageing workforce, despite mounting public resistance against new arrivals.

Germany's first ever immigration law, to be agreed by Chancellor Angela Merkel's cabinet on Wednesday, is eagerly anticipated by industries.

But the law, which will have to be put to parliament, risks opening new fault lines in a country already deeply split over a record influx of more than a million mostly Muslim refugees and migrants since 2015.

The German Trade Union Confederation has also warned that the eased access could lead to salary dumping and exploitation of foreign workers.

Under the planned relaxed rules, jobseekers from outside the EU -- including, for example, cooks, metal-lurgy workers or IT technicians -- would be allowed to come to Germany for six months to try and find employment, provided they speak German and can financially support themselves.

More controversial has been a plan to allow migrants already in Germany who are awaiting decisions on their asylum applications to stay if they are gainfully employed and can show

they have joined the fabric of German society.

Following an outcry from the more conservative wing of Merkel's CDU party, it was unclear whether ministers would water down elements of the draft proposal, especially on the issue of employment for rejected asylum seekers.

Julia Kloeckner, a heavyweight in the CDU party, has warned amid a heated debate that this part of the package could create "a wrong incentive" for more people to try to get to Germany.

German industry and employment leaders however wrote in a letter to Interior Minister Horst Seehofer that "attempts to essentially water down the planned rules in the draft law endanger the aim of a targeted and necessary migration of workers".

Some 60 percent of companies see a worker shortage as a risk for the development of their businesses, according to the letter, which added that the number of unfilled apprenticeship posts surpasses the 33,000 applications that are still being processed.

Immigration has become a hot potato issue in recent years over the record influx of migrants, many fleeing war in Iraq or Syria.

Railing against the newcomers, the far-right AfD has become Germany's biggest opposition party.

But Germany is also anxious to not leave thousands of migrants -- who may spend years waiting on a final decision on their asylum claims or deportation -- idle and susceptible to taking on jobs in the black market.

The government ministers had stressed that the new immigration rules are not designed to allow failed asylum applicants to win residency in Germany by switching over to become employment migrants.

Rather the new rules are aimed at providing a "pragmatic solution" for migrants who, for instance, have been in Germany for a protracted period because they cannot be deported if they face the risk of torture in their country of origin.

With unemployment at a record low since Germany's 1990 reunification, companies in Europe's biggest economy have been complaining that a chronic shortage in workers is threatening growth.

In the areas of mathematics, computing, natural sciences and technology, a record 338,200 jobs went unfilled in September, according to data from the Cologne-based German Economic Institute.

Economy Minister Peter Altmaier had said the new rules will especially help Germany's small-and-medium sized companies, "which in the past have suffered as they are in competition with big companies that have poached the well-trained people".



Md Alamgir Kabir, additional managing director of Crown Cement, attends a programme in Dhaka on Tuesday where the company honoured freedom fighters Nurul Islam Khan Pathan Bir Protik of Kishoreganj and Md Anwar Hossain of Mymensingh with financial assistance and gift vouchers marking Victory Day.

Govt signs WB deal for livestock funds

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh has signed a \$500 million financing agreement with World Bank to improve livestock and dairy production as well as provide better market access to 2 million household farmers and small and medium-scale agro-entrepreneurs.

The agreement was signed by Monowar Ahmed, secretary to Economic Relations Division (ERD), and Dandan Chen, acting country director of WB for Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, at the ERD in the capital.

By 2021, the country is likely to face an annual shortage of 1.5 billion eggs and nearly 6 million tonnes of milk,

according to World Bank.

By enhancing the availability of dairy, egg and meat products, the project will help improve nutrition for citizens, especially children, pregnant women and new mothers, the global lender said in a statement.

"Through improving market linkages and ensuring good practices, Bangladesh can increase livestock production significantly. Growth in livestock productivity potentially leads to growth in jobs for women, youth, and other vulnerable groups," said Chen.

According to the WB, the project will help small-scale livestock farmers—half of whom are women—adopt

improved agricultural technologies.

The project will promote climate resilient and emission-saving practices in the sector and will address issues related to food safety, environmental pollution, anti-microbial resistance and animal welfare, Ahmed said.

"The project will contribute to achieving the government's plan to substantially increase livestock production to feed the growing population."

The credit, coming from the WB's International Development Association, has a 30-year term, including a five-year grace period, and carries a service charge of 0.75 percent and an interest of 1.25 percent.

GM seeds may face hurdles

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Farmers apply heavy doses of pesticide to protect eggplants from pest infestation.

Bangladesh Rice Research Institute and Cotton Development Board are working to release GE rice and cotton which bear the names Golden Rice and Bt Cotton respectively.

The USDA terms Bangladesh a role model in case of accepting and advancing modern biotechnologies in daily life.

It said with innovative biotech support from the world scientific community, Bangladesh was progressing gradually to initiate research and trials of new GE varieties.

The government is also supporting scientists in this advancement, but regulatory policies are not fully developed to cover all aspects of production and marketing, it added.

"Although, government funding for research is limited, Bangladesh became a leader in GE vegetables, such as Bacillus thuringiensis (Bt) brinjal production, for commercial use and consumption," said the report.

Since the release, the Bari has been producing and distributing Bt brinjal seeds among farmers. The highest amount of seeds of GE eggplant, 1,827 kilogrammes (kg), was produced in fiscal 2016-17.

Production of seeds of Bt brinjal by BADC slumped to 612 kg in 2017-18, according to the USDA report, which says 1,400 kg of seeds are in stock.

The USDA said seed multiplication was continuing through increased interest of farmers. Some 1.50 lakh farmers produce brinjal on their farms and 23 percent of them are producing Bt Brinjal.

It is estimated that 5.95 percent of 80,000 acres of farm land set aside for growing brinjal are cultivated with Bt brinjal, according to the report.

Dilafroza Khanam, chief scientific officer and head of the biotechnology division of the Bari, said farmers got higher production as the fruit and shoot borer disease did not affect the crops for use of GE seeds.

Economy to accelerate

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The article said on many fronts, Bangladesh's economic performance has indeed exceeded even government targets.

With a national strategy focused on manufacturing—dominated by the garment industry—the country has seen exports to soar by an average annual rate of 15-17 percent in recent years to reach a record \$36.7 billion in the year through June. On the increasing Chinese investment in Bangladesh Hasina said it is simply a fact that China is set to play a bigger role in the region.

"Our foreign policy is very clear: friendly relations with everyone," she said. "What China and US are doing, it is between them."



Nasreen Awal Minto, president of the Women Entrepreneur Association of Bangladesh (WEAB), speaks at a press conference arranged in Dhaka yesterday to share experiences and achievements of an economic and socio-cultural exposure visit of the association's members to China's Kunming. A 100-member WEAB team visited Kunming in two phases in November on the invitation of the Chinese government to explore opportunities to conduct bilateral entrepreneurship.

Benefits elude workers with no job contracts

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The study surveyed some 250 youths aged between 15 to 29 years employed in construction, automobile garages, beauty parlours, hotels and restaurant and online businesses in Dhaka, Chattogram and Satkhira districts.

Employing 86.2 percent of the workforce, the informal sector neither complies with labour laws nor promotes decent work, according to the study.

Decent work encompasses issues such as employment contracts, working time, rest and leave, welfare, social protection, freedom of association and collective bargaining and addresses workplace discrimination and harassment.

The sector provides no social protection like gratuity and provident funds and group insurance facility, according to the study.

It found workers facing vulnerabilities at workplaces for a lack of

legal coverage. Some 61 percent of the youth reported the practice of job expulsions without prior notice.

Moreover, workers do not enjoy decent working hours, as nine out of every 10 youths work over eight hours a day.

The study also found wage discriminations in occupations. Some 60 percent earn up to Tk 10,000 every month while 40 percent less than Tk 6,000.

Some 98 percent of workers do not even know the minimum wage amount declared for their sectors.

Wage discrimination exists on a large scale for a lack of knowledge and education to negotiate salaries with employers, said Shafiqur Rahman, project manager of Women and Youth and Entrepreneurship and Employability.

Some 57.6 percent of workers do not always get festival bonuses while 86 percent claim to have never received attendance bonus. Most

never get transport and lunch allowance and money for refreshment and training.

Child labour is still high in the sector as 30 percent of the youths reported of its existence. The study data shows the presence of child labour in 60 percent of the hotels and restaurants, followed by 54 percent of the automobile garages.

Though a lion's share of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, productivity there is very low, said Abdul Mazed, deputy director of National Skills Development Council.

Skills development training is a must to enhance productivity, he said.

Non compliance to labour laws in the informal sector is the main barrier towards protecting decent work, speakers opined at the event.

The study recommended raising awareness among youths on the decent work situation.

BP launches \$3b sale of US onshore assets to fund BHP deal

REUTERS, London/New York

Britain's BP has launched the sale of US oil and gas onshore assets that could raise more than \$3 billion to help pay for other fields in the United States it bought in October from BHP.

The sale proceeds will partly fund the \$10.5 billion acquisition of BHP's onshore assets that are mostly around oil-producing fields in Texas and Louisiana. BP had said it would sell \$5 billion to \$6 billion to finance the deal. The London-listed firm wants to focus on production from its holdings in the Permian and Eagle Ford basins to match rivals Exxon Mobil and Chevron whose production there is set to rise sharply in coming years.

Assess impact of new VAT law first

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In a letter sent to the chairman of the National Board of Revenue, the apex trade body suggested that the changes between the VAT and Supplementary Duty Act 2012 and VAT Act 1991 should be identified as part of the study.

It stressed the need for assessing the impact of the new law on import, exports, manufacturing and trading in light of the VAT Act 1991 that has been in effect for more than two and a half decades.

The plea came months before the planned implementation of the new VAT law, enforcement of which was shelved for two years since June last year.

Its implementation was halted amid public outcry and reported pressure from the business community who opined that a uniform 15 percent VAT instead of the existing multiple rates would hurt businesses and raise living costs.

The FBCCI in its letter urged for studying incidence of application of 15 percent VAT, and impact of withdrawal of package and truncated VAT rates on retail business, service sector and consumers.

It also demanded impact assessment of the new law on small and medium enterprises and the service sector, assess capacity of businesses and revenue officials for enforcement of the new legislation and determine steps required.

The FBCCI also demanded that the NBR revise the new law by doing cost benefit analysis on the basis of proposals from the NBR field offices and recommendations of its member organisations.



Asif Ahmed, an executive assistant manager of Pan Pacific Sonargaon Dhaka, and ANM Mahfuz, head of consumer banking of Prime Bank, exchange documents after signing a deal recently. The bank's Platinum, World Mastercard and Monarch (priority banking) cardholders can avail a buy-one-get-one-free offer on buffet lunch and dinner. MA Awal, another executive assistant manager of the hotel, was present.



Sheikh Kabir Hossain, chairman of Central Depository Bangladesh Ltd, presides over the company's 18th annual general meeting at Dhaka Club yesterday. The company approved 25 percent cash dividend for 2017-18. Shuvra Kanti Choudhury, CEO, was present.