

Japan

Inflows of foreign nationals to Japan in 2007 increased to 337 000 (excluding temporary visitors). The flows are about evenly split between labour, family and ancestry-based migrants (persons of Japanese ancestry from Latin America). The inflow of foreign nationals for employment fell 4.3% in 2007 to 78 000. Of these, 10 300 were foreign students granted a change of status for employment after graduation. Most (22 800) new legal foreign workers are specialists in humanities/international services and engineers, an increase of 18% from 2006.

Temporary visitors were more numerous in 2007, increasing by 1 million (15.2%) to reach 7.4 million, due largely to tourist campaigns, including expansion of visa issuance for Chinese, and visa exemption programs for Korean and Taiwanese citizens. Other major groups among temporary migrants include students (47 900), about 90% of whom come from Asia, especially China (60%) and Korea (15%), and trainees (102 000). The number of trainees rose in 2007 to a record high of 102 000, but began to decline in October 2008, with companies' applications for accepting trainees or technical interns falling 26% in November from a year earlier to 4 700.

The proportion of registered foreigners in the population stood at about 1.7% at the end of 2007. This is an increase of 3.3% from the previous year and a record high of 2.2 million, yet very low compared to other OECD countries. The largest origin groups are Chinese (28%), Koreans (28%) and Brazilians (15%).

Foreign workers of Japanese descent make up about half of the legal foreign workforce of 800 000 estimated at the end of 2007.

The number of overstayers in Japan continues to decline and fell to 150 000 in 2008, a 12.3% decrease from 2007 and a nearly 50 % fall since 1993. Including illegal entrants, the total number of illegal foreign nationals is estimated to be approximately 174 000. This suggests an unauthorized population of about 0.14% of the total population, among the lowest in OECD countries. Favourable geography (no land borders) contributes to this, but also stricter immigration controls, workplace enforcement and preventative measures taken against illegal employment.

The major recent policy change is the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act of July 2009, which replaces the Alien Registration Act. Revisions of the foreign residency rule shift authority from local municipalities to the Immigration Bureau in the Ministry of Justice, which will now conduct central registration of foreign residents and issue residence cards. Foreigners must now register in the resident registry network linking municipalities. Visas previously issued for three years will be extended to five years; also, re-entry permits are no longer required if the foreign resident returns within a year. As a measure to reduce the number of undocumented foreign residents, punishments will become stricter and include cancellation of the residential status. Applications for spouse visas will be more closely scrutinized to prevent fake marriages.

Although there is no regularization in Japan, undocumented foreigners may obtain special permission to stay on a case-by-case basis. The Minister of Justice issued about 7 400 special permits in 2007. While such permits had been at least at the 10 000 level since 2003, they have not reached this margin in the past two years. The new bill requires the Ministry to clarify the decision criteria leading to permission or deportation.

In the course of the economic downturn, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare launched a voluntary return program in April 2009, under which financial incentives to return to their home countries are provided to unemployed foreign workers of Japanese ancestry and their dependents (JPY 300 000 per worker and 200 000 per dependent). Beneficiaries are barred from returning to Japan with the same visa type.

In January and April 2009, in response to the economic crisis, the Japanese Cabinet Office launched its broadest integration policy so far. Integration programs including establishment of service centers in areas with high foreign population and language courses for unemployed foreigners, especially those with Japanese ancestry, have also been strengthened to support the reemployment of foreign workers who have lost their jobs and to support social integration. Educational measures for their children were also launched.

Further information:

<http://www.immi-moj.go.jp/english>

<http://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/index.html>

<http://www8.cao.go.jp/teiju-portal/eng/index.html>