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Japan Keeps a High Wall for Foreign Labor

By [HIROKO TABUCHI](#)

KASHIWA, Japan — Maria Fransiska, a young, hard-working nurse from Indonesia, is just the kind of worker [Japan](#) would seem to need to replenish its aging work force.

But Ms. Fransiska, 26, is having to fight to stay. To extend her three-year stint at a hospital outside Tokyo, she must pass a standardized nursing exam administered in Japanese, a test so difficult that only 3 of the 600 nurses brought here from Indonesia and the Philippines since 2007 have passed.

So Ms. Fransiska spends eight hours in Japanese language drills, on top of her day job at the hospital. Her dictionary is dog-eared from countless queries, but she is determined: her starting salary of \$2,400 a month was 10 times what she could earn back home. If she fails, she will never be allowed to return to Japan on the same program again.

“I think I have something to contribute here,” Ms. Fransiska said during a recent visit, spooning mouthfuls of rice and vegetables into the mouth of Heiichi Matsumaru, an 80-year-old patient recovering from a stroke. “If I could, I would stay here long-term, but it is not so easy.”

Despite facing an imminent labor shortage as its population ages, Japan has done little to open itself up to [immigration](#). In fact, as Ms. Fransiska and many others have discovered, the government is doing the opposite, actively encouraging both foreign workers and foreign graduates of its universities and professional schools to return home while protecting tiny interest groups — in the case of Ms. Fransiska, a local nursing association afraid that an influx of foreign nurses would lower industry salaries.

In 2009, the number of registered foreigners here fell for the first time since the government started to track annual records almost a half-century ago, shrinking 1.4 percent from a year earlier to 2.19 million people — or just 1.71 percent of Japan’s overall population of 127.5 million.

Experts say increased immigration provides one obvious remedy to Japan’s two decades of lethargic economic growth. But instead of accepting young workers, however — and along with them, fresh ideas — Tokyo seems to have resigned itself to a demographic crisis that threatens to stunt the country’s economic growth, hamper efforts to deal with its chronic budget deficits and bankrupt its social security system.

“If you’re in the medical field, it’s obvious that Japan needs workers from overseas to survive. But there’s still resistance,” said Yukiyo Shintani, chairman of the Aoikai Group, the medical

services company that is sponsoring Ms. Fransiska and three other nurses to work at a hospital outside Tokyo. “The exam,” he said, “is to make sure the foreigners will fail.”

Tan Soon Keong, a student, speaks five languages — English, Japanese, Mandarin, Cantonese and Hokkien — has an engineering degree, and three years of work experience in his native Malaysia, a track record that would seem to be invaluable to Japanese companies seeking to globalize their businesses.

Still, he says he is not confident about landing a job in Japan when he completes his two-year technical program at a college in Tokyo’s suburbs next spring. For one thing, many companies here set an upper age limit for fresh graduate hires; at 26, many consider him too old to apply. Others have told him they are not hiring foreigners this year.

Mr. Tan is not alone. In 2008, only 11,000 of the 130,000 foreign students at Japan’s universities and technical colleges found jobs here, according to the recruitment firm Mainichi Communications. While some Japanese companies have publicly said they will hire more foreigners in a bid to globalize their work forces, they remain a minority.

“I’m preparing for the possibility that I may have to return to Malaysia,” Mr. Tan said at a recent job fair for foreign students in Tokyo. “I’d ideally work at a company like Toyota,” he said. “But that’s looking very difficult.”

Japan is losing skilled talent across industries, experts say. Investment banks, for example, are moving more staff members to hubs like Hong Kong and Singapore, which have more foreigner-friendly immigration and taxation regimes, lower costs of living and local populations that speak better English.

Foreigners who submitted new applications for residential status — an important indicator of highly skilled labor because the status requires a specialized profession — slumped 49 percent in 2009 from a year earlier to just 8,905 people.

The barriers to immigration to Japan are many. Restrictive immigration laws bar the country’s struggling farms or workshops from access to foreign labor, driving some to [abuse trainee programs](#) for workers from developing countries, or hire illegal immigrants. Stringent qualification requirements shut out skilled foreign professionals, while a web of complex rules and procedures discourages entrepreneurs from setting up in Japan.

Given the dim job prospects, universities here have been less than successful at raising foreign student enrollment numbers. And in the current harsh economic climate, as local incomes fall and new college graduates struggle to land jobs, there has been scant political will to broach what has been a delicate topic.

But Japan’s demographic time clock is ticking: its population will fall by almost a third to 90 million within 50 years, according to government forecasts. By 2055, more than one in three Japanese will be over 65, as the working-age population falls by over a third to 52 million.

Still, when a heavyweight of the defeated Liberal Democratic Party unveiled a plan in 2008 calling for Japan to accept at least 10 million immigrants, opinion polls showed that a majority of Japanese were opposed. A survey of roughly 2,400 voters earlier this year by the daily Asahi Shimbun showed that 65 percent of respondents opposed a more open immigration policy.

“The shrinking population is the biggest problem. The country is fighting for its survival,” said Hidenori Sakanaka, director of the Japan Immigration Policy Institute, an independent research organization. “Despite everything, America manages to stay vibrant because it attracts people from all over the world,” he said. “On the other hand, Japan is content to all but shut out people from overseas.”

Now, in a vicious cycle, Japan’s economic woes, coupled with a lack of progress in immigration policy and lack of support for immigrants, are setting off an exodus of the precious few immigrants who have settled here.

Akira Saito, 37, a Brazilian of Japanese descent who traveled to Toyota City 20 years ago from São Paulo, is one foreign worker ready to leave. The small auto maintenance outfit that Mr. Saito opened after a string of factory jobs is struggling, and the clothing store that employs his Brazilian wife, Tiemi, will soon close. Their three young children are among the local Brazilian school’s few remaining pupils.

For many of Mr. Saito’s compatriots who lost their jobs in the fallout from the global economic crisis, there has been scant government support. Some in the community have taken money from a [controversial government-sponsored program](#) intended to encourage jobless migrant workers to go home.

“I came to Japan for the opportunities,” Mr. Saito said. “Lately, I feel there will be more opportunity back home.”

Though Japan had experienced a significant amount of migration in the decades after World War II, it was not until the dawn of Japan’s “bubble economy” of the 1980s that real pressure built on the government to relax immigration restrictions as a way to supply workers to industries like manufacturing and construction.

What ensued was a revision of the immigration laws in a way that policy makers believed would keep the country’s ethnic homogeneity intact. In 1990, Japan started to issue visas to foreign citizens exclusively of Japanese descent, like the descendants of Japanese who emigrated to Brazil in search of opportunities in the last century. In the 1990s, the number of Japanese Brazilians who came to Japan in search of work, like Mr. Saito, surged.

But the government did little to integrate its migrant populations. Children of foreigners are exempt from compulsory education, for example, while local schools that accept non-Japanese-speaking children receive almost no help in caring for their needs. Many immigrant children drop out, supporters say, and many foreign workers in Toyota City say they want to return to Brazil.

“Japan does not build strong links between immigrants and the local community,” said Hiroyuki Nomoto, who runs a school for immigrant children in Toyota City.

The country is losing its allure even for wide-eyed fans of its cutting-edge technology, its pop culture and the seemingly endless business opportunities its developed consumer society appears to offer.

“Visitors come to Tokyo and see such a high-tech, colorful city. They get this gleam in their eye, they say they want to move here,” said Takara Swoopes Bullock, an American entrepreneur who has lived in Japan since 2005. “But setting up shop here is a completely different thing. Often, it just doesn’t make sense, so people move on.”