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Saudis to Delay a Measure Deporting Foreign Workers

By KAREEM FAHIM and MAYY EL SHEIKH

CAIRO — Almost two weeks after [Saudi Arabia](#) started deporting thousands of foreign workers from [Yemen](#) and other countries in a crackdown that drew protests from local business owners and foreign diplomats, Saudi officials on Saturday reversed course and announced a three-month grace period for the workers, according to the official Saudi news agency.

In late March, Saudi officials announced changes to the country's employment code, promising tough measures, including deportation, for foreigners found to be violating the work-visa sponsorship system. The statement on Saturday said the workers had three months to conform with the new regulations.

It was not immediately clear whether workers who had already been deported — including up to 20,000 from Yemen, according to officials there — would be allowed to return.

Saudi officials have framed the crackdown as part of a continuing effort to lower the country's staggering youth unemployment rate, in part by shifting the balance in hiring practices for private-sector jobs, which are overwhelmingly occupied by the kingdom's 10 million foreign workers. In November, the government started penalizing private companies that hire more foreigners than Saudi citizens as part of a plan to create six million new jobs for Saudis by 2030.

The policy also reflects fears of political instability among the monarchies of the Persian Gulf region, where the authorities have combined inducements with repression to contain the discontent among young people that helped propel the Arab uprisings more than two years ago.

Officials in Kuwait also recently announced a policy to reduce its high proportion of expatriate workers over the next decade.

After the crackdown was announced, some Saudi employers reported that their businesses had been raided and said that employees fearful of the authorities were staying away from work. A lawyer in Saudi Arabia said that “an army of women law enforcers” had descended on women-only shops and salons to find people in violation of the law.

At one of the country's largest ports, in Jidda, workers said that the handling of shipments had slowed because most of the port's foreign workers were staying home, according to a report on Saturday in The Saudi Gazette. Workers told the newspaper that the labor force had dwindled to about 200 workers from more than a thousand before the government announced its new enforcement policy.

Yemen, Saudi Arabia's neighbor and the region's most impoverished country, was perhaps hardest hit by the policy. Rajeh Badi, a media adviser to Yemen's prime minister, said in an interview last week that 18,000 to 20,000 Yemenis had been deported from Saudi Arabia since the authorities started enforcing the new regulations, cutting off a critical source of remittances. The deportations led to protests in Yemen's capital, Sana, last week.

In Yemen, "there are no jobs," Mr. Badi said. "Those returning Yemenis will be joining the lines of unemployment."

At least a million Yemenis are believed to be working in Saudi Arabia, mostly as laborers who remain with their original sponsors for only a few months before trying to find other work, Mr. Badi said. He added that it was often difficult for workers to switch to other sponsors, raising questions about whether the grace period would be able to help Yemeni workers in Saudi Arabia legalize their status.

Hala Droubi contributed reporting from Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/07/world/middleeast/port-lacks-workers-after-saudi-immigration-crackdown.html>