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Border-Crossing Dilemmas under the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Focus on Filipino and other Southeast Asian Workers Residing in Japan and Heading for Japan

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Introduction

- This presentation mainly focuses on Japan's foreign residents whose numbers reached at around three million by the end of 2019. Under the prolonged pandemic, a part of them wish to return to their home countries, but have faced difficulties due to restrictions set in place in Japan and their home countries.
- Yet a number of neighboring Asian workers longing to move to Japan have been forced to stay in their home countries for a long time. I elaborates on their dilemmas related to border-crossing, and discusses distinct problems of migration policies in Japan and sending countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines under the global crisis.
- These arguments and analyses are based on my face-to-face interviews and online interviews with Southeast Asian workers and volunteers as well as government officials concerned.

“Simultaneous National Isolation” across the Globe

- The rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the closure of national boundaries across the world. By late April 2020, almost all countries introduced restrictions on travel, and prohibited, as a general rule, the entry of foreigners.
- Although some European countries began to lift their entry restrictions to foreigners before this summer vacation season, Asia and Pacific countries have kept very cautious stance for accepting foreign travelers until nowadays.
- Japan has started negotiations to ease entry restrictions with some “safer” countries such as Australia, NZ, Thailand and Vietnam in June 2020.

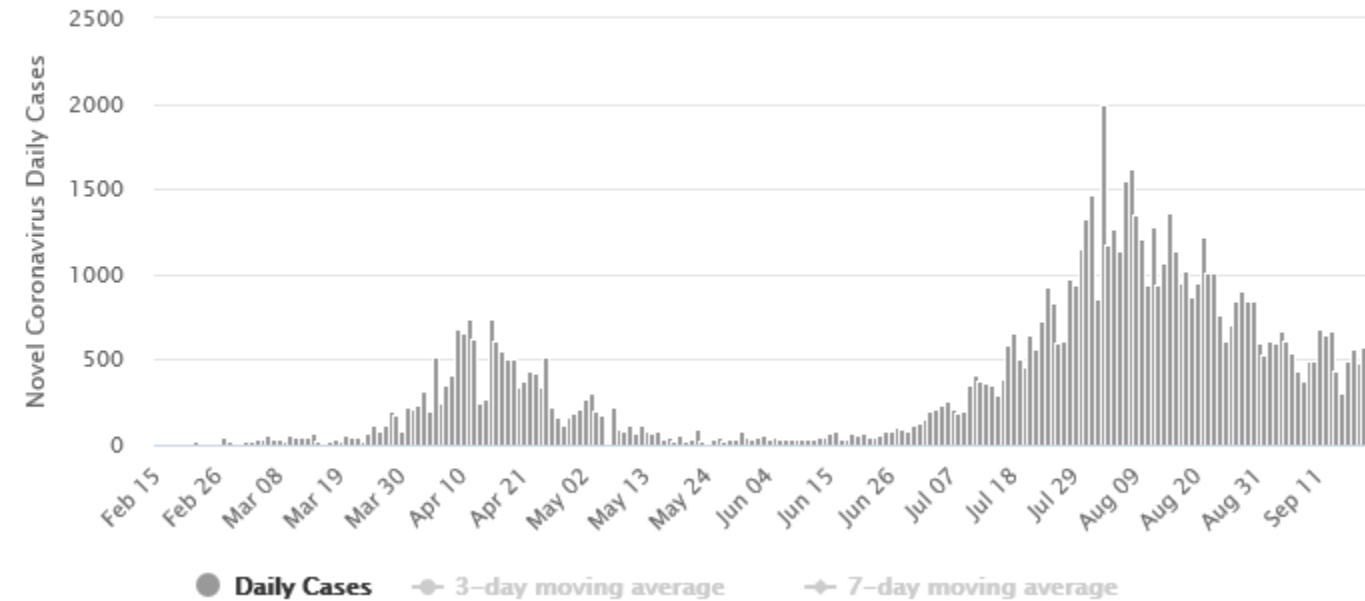
The Case of Japan as of 23 September 2020

79,438 cases

1,508 deaths

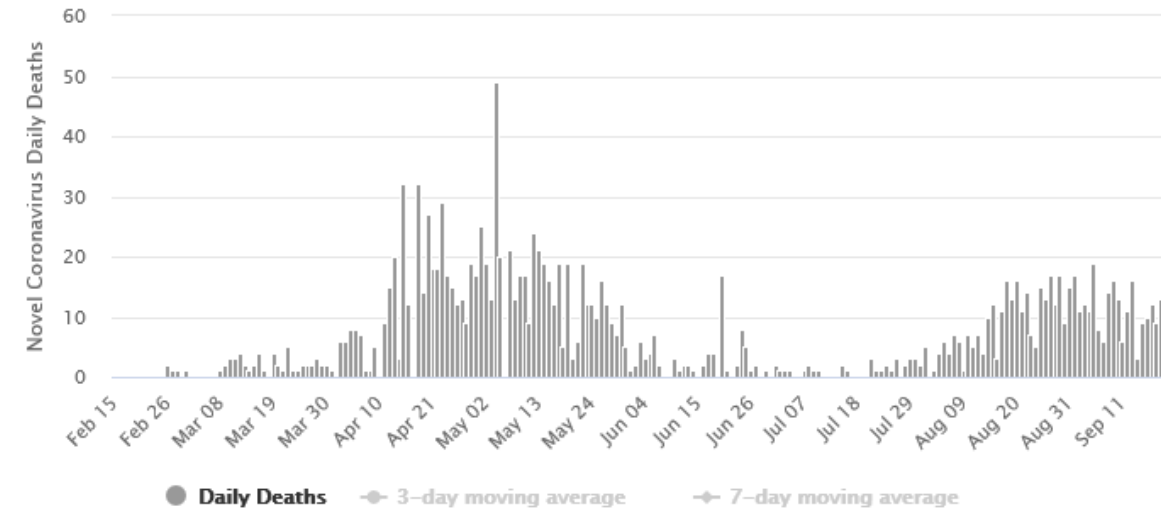
Daily New Cases

Cases per Day
Data as of 0:00 GMT+0



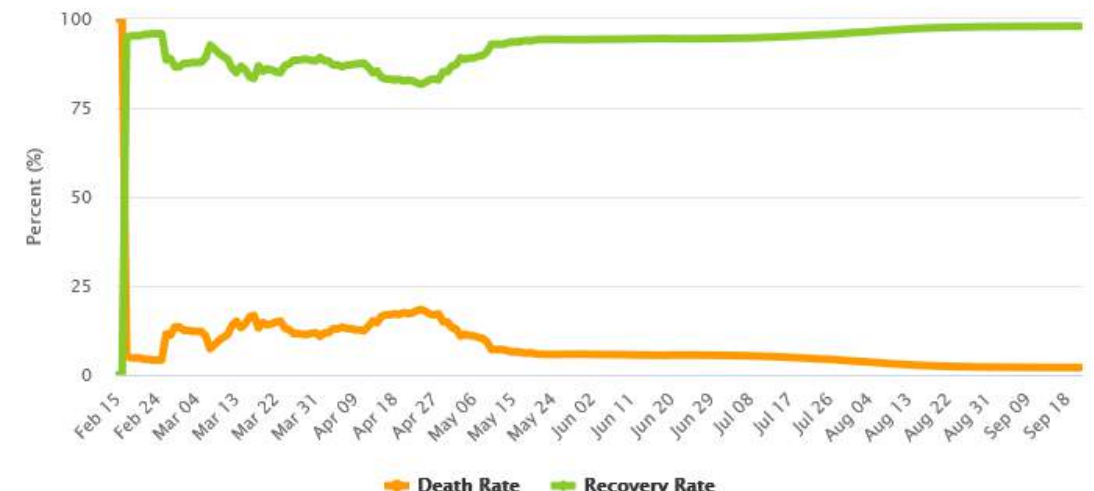
Daily Deaths

Deaths per Day
Data as of 0:00 GMT+8



Outcome of total closed cases (recovery rate vs death rate)

(Cumulative total deaths and recoveries over cumulative number of closed cases)

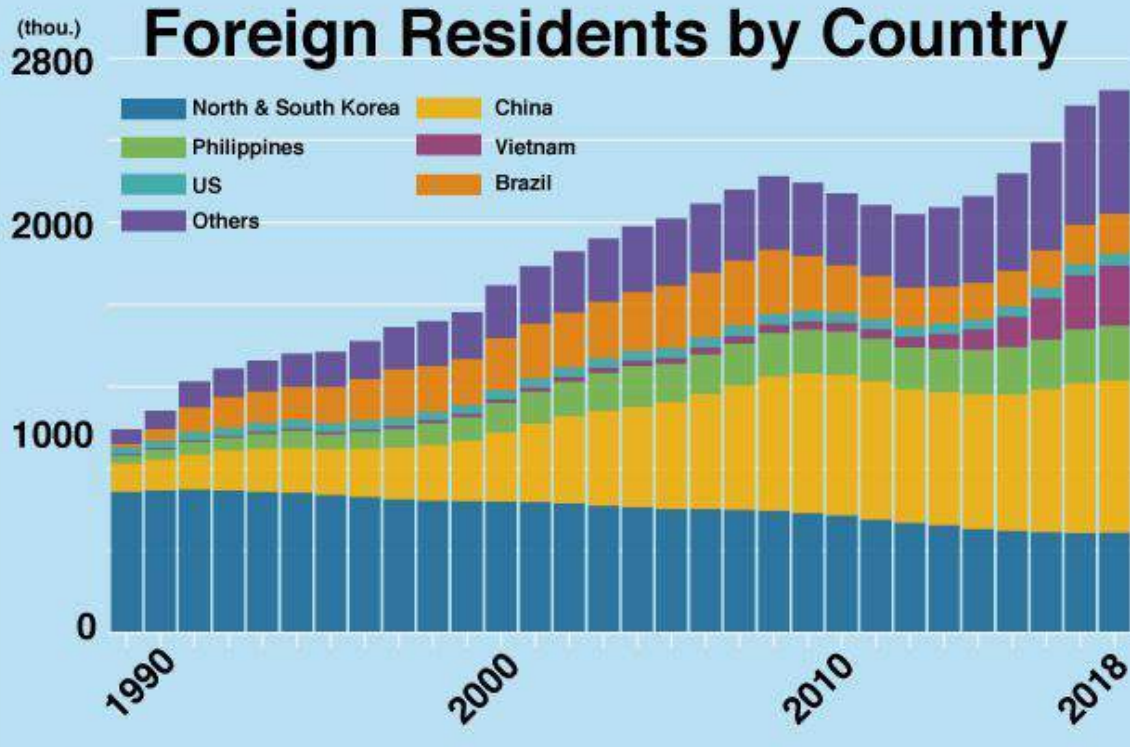


(source) worldmeter, 2020,

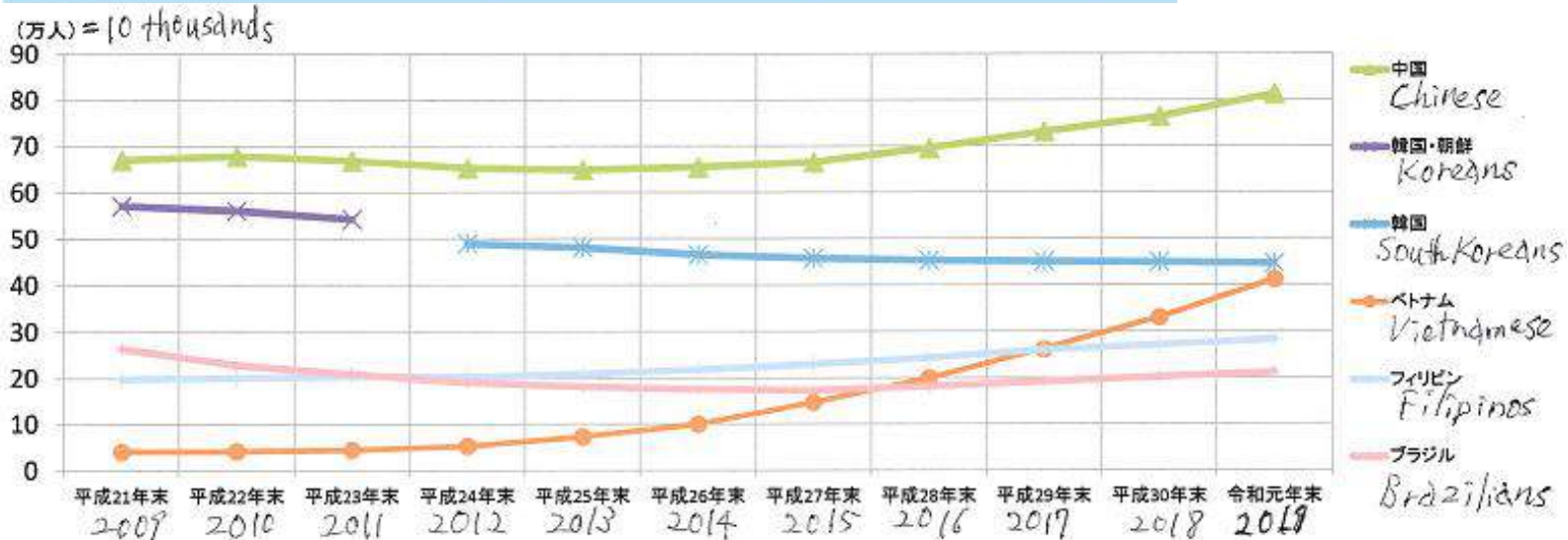
“WORLD/COUNTRIES/JAPAN”

<<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/japan>>, accessed 23 Sep.2020.

Transition of Numbers of Foreign Residents by Country in Japan



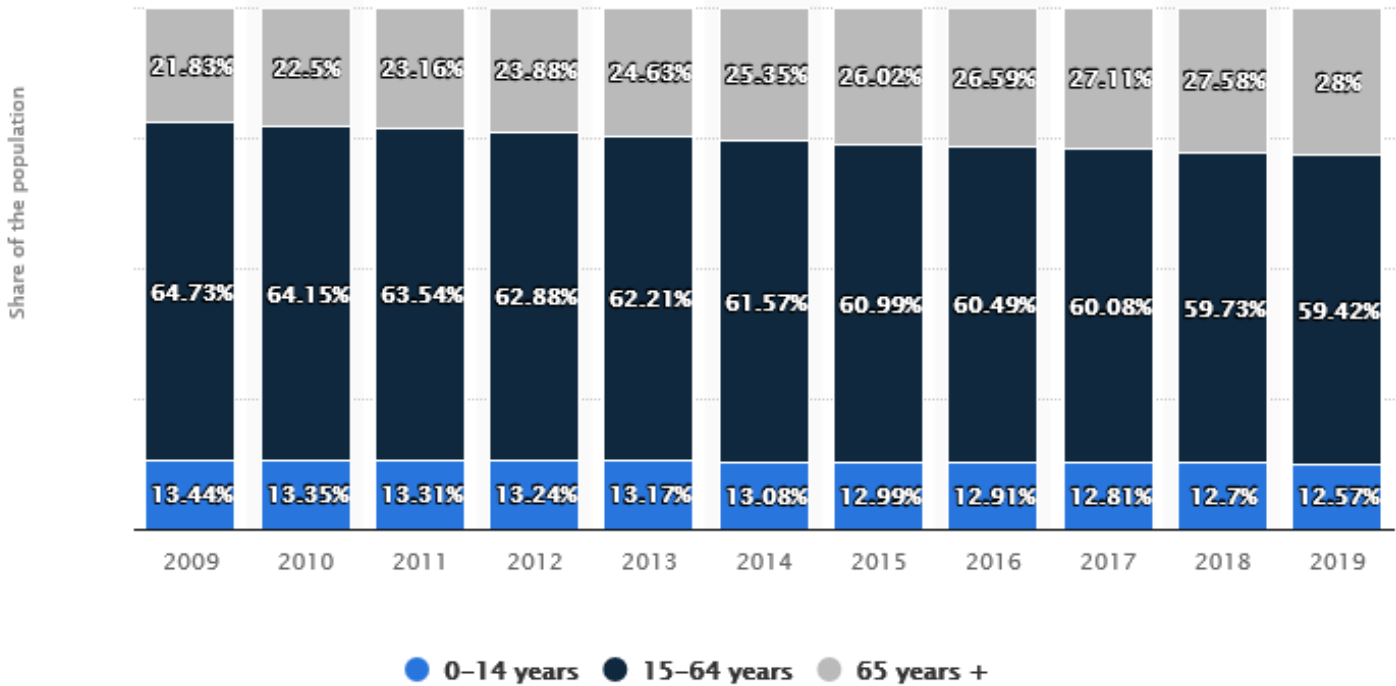
(source) NHK World-Japan, 2019, "Opening the door to incoming workers".



(source) Ministry of Justice, 2020, "Transition of numbers of foreign residents by nationality/area".

In parallel with Japan's declining birthrate and aging population, the number of foreign workers increased year by year

Japan: Age Distribution from 2009 to 2019



Number of Foreign Workers in Japan at Record High

Number of foreign nationals working in Japan (in thousands)



28.7% rate of aging as of Sep.2020

(source) statista, 2020.

Source: MHLW Japan

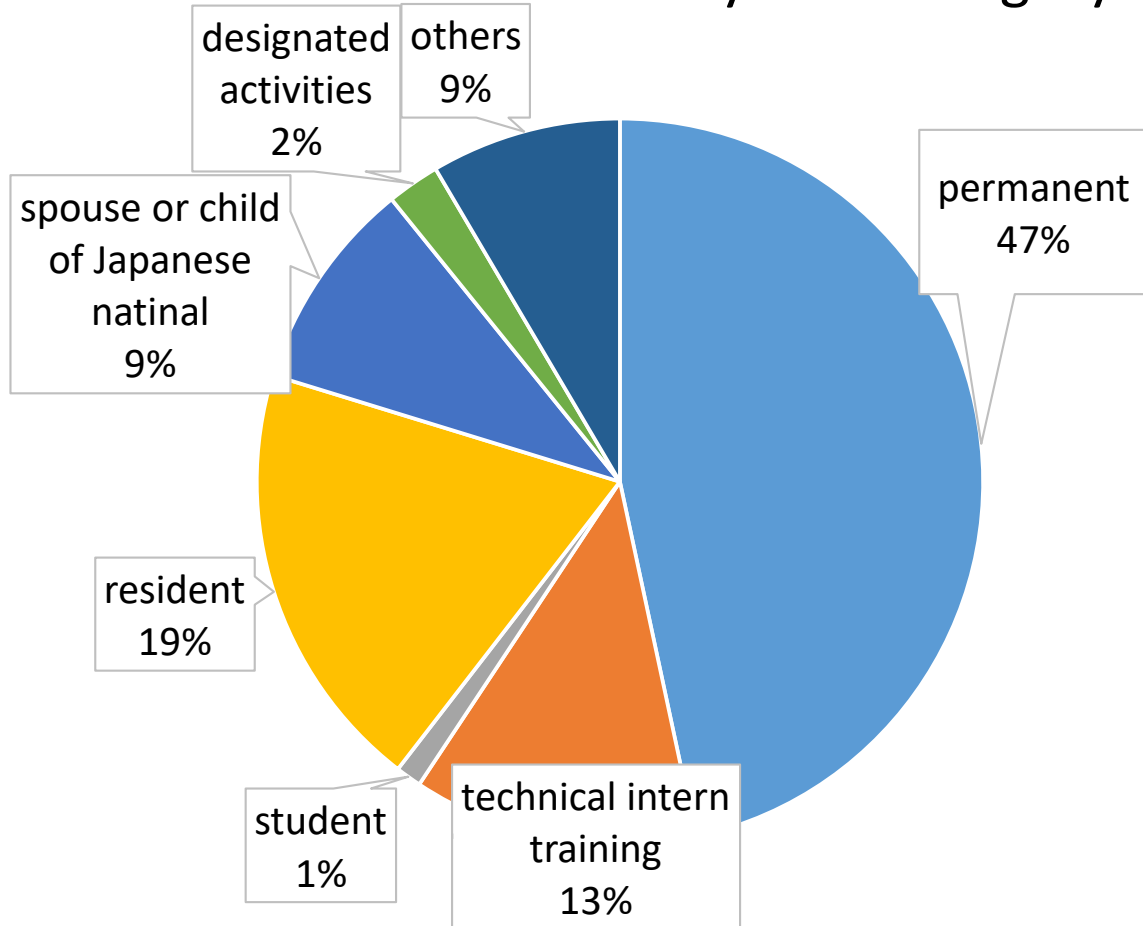


Different Visa Composition of Filipinos and Vietnamese in Japan

(The following figures are as of the end of 2019)

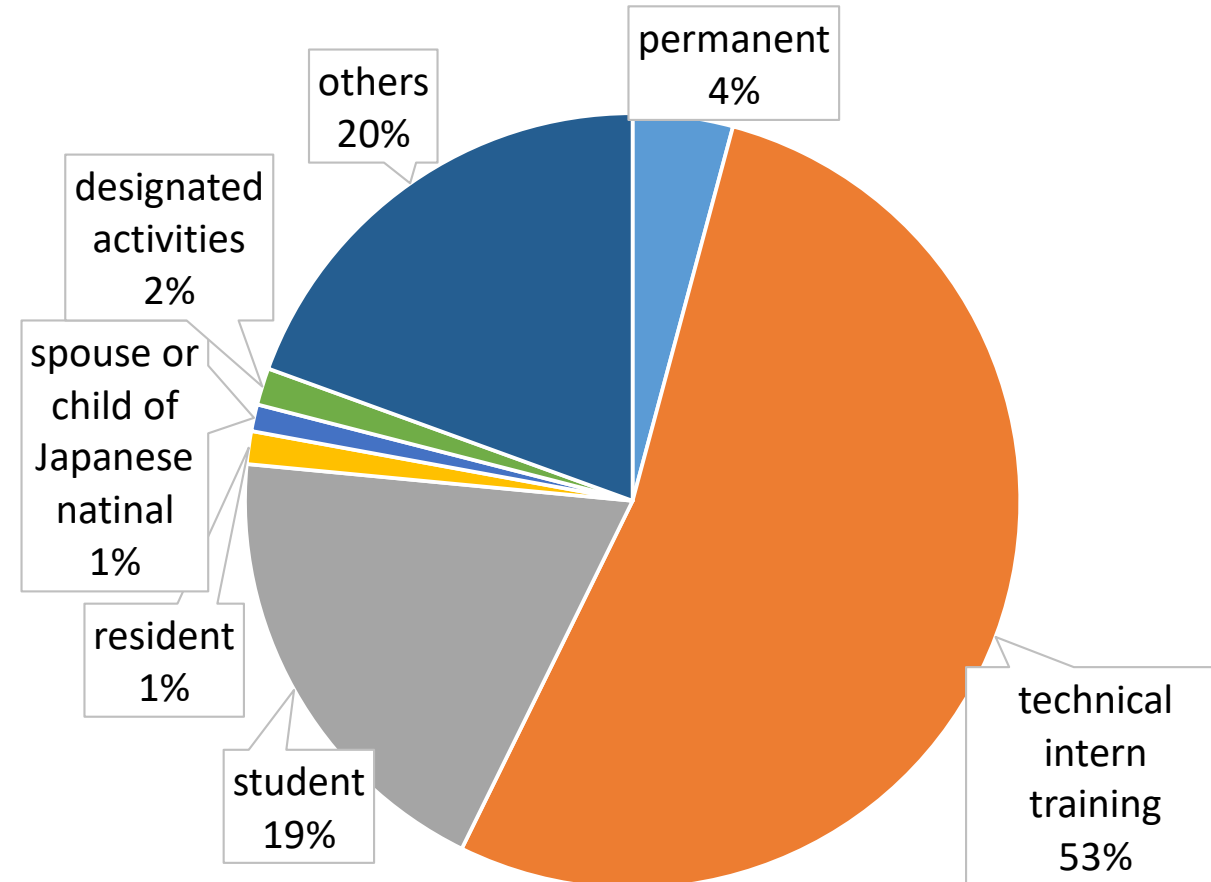
Filipino Residents(282,798)

by Visa Category



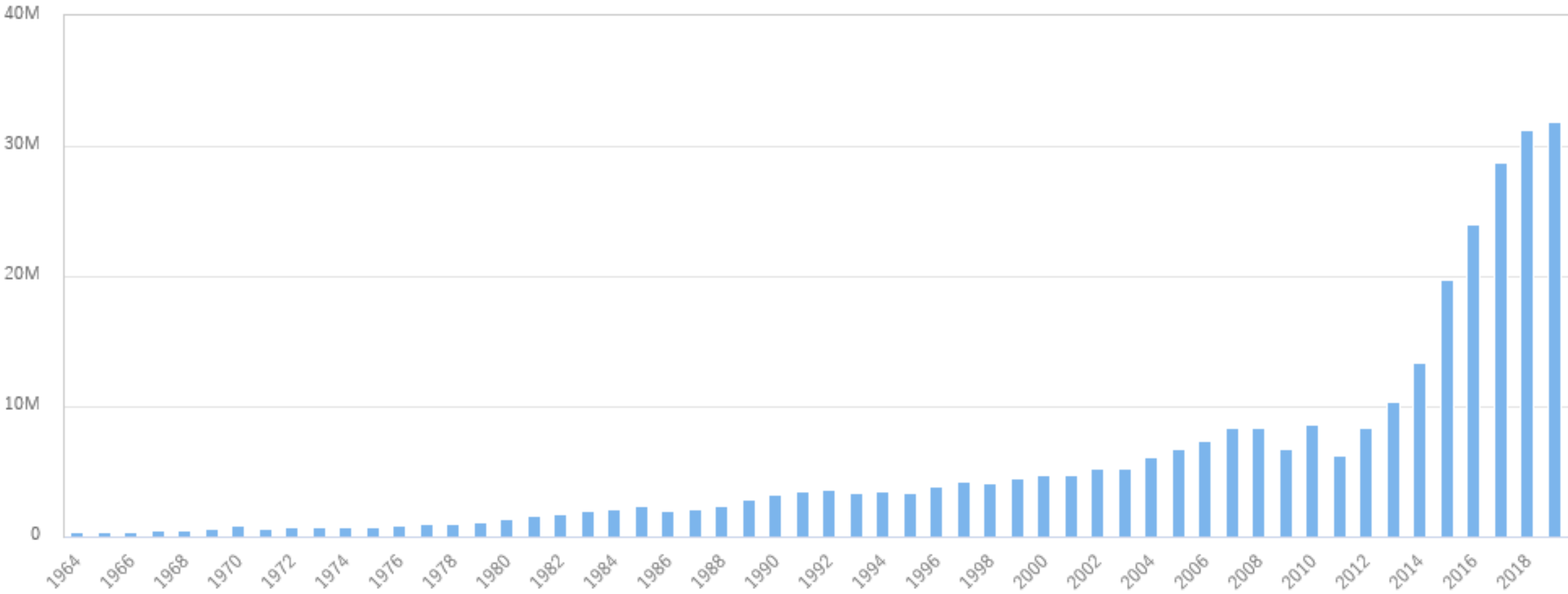
Vietnamese Residents(411,968)

by Visa Category



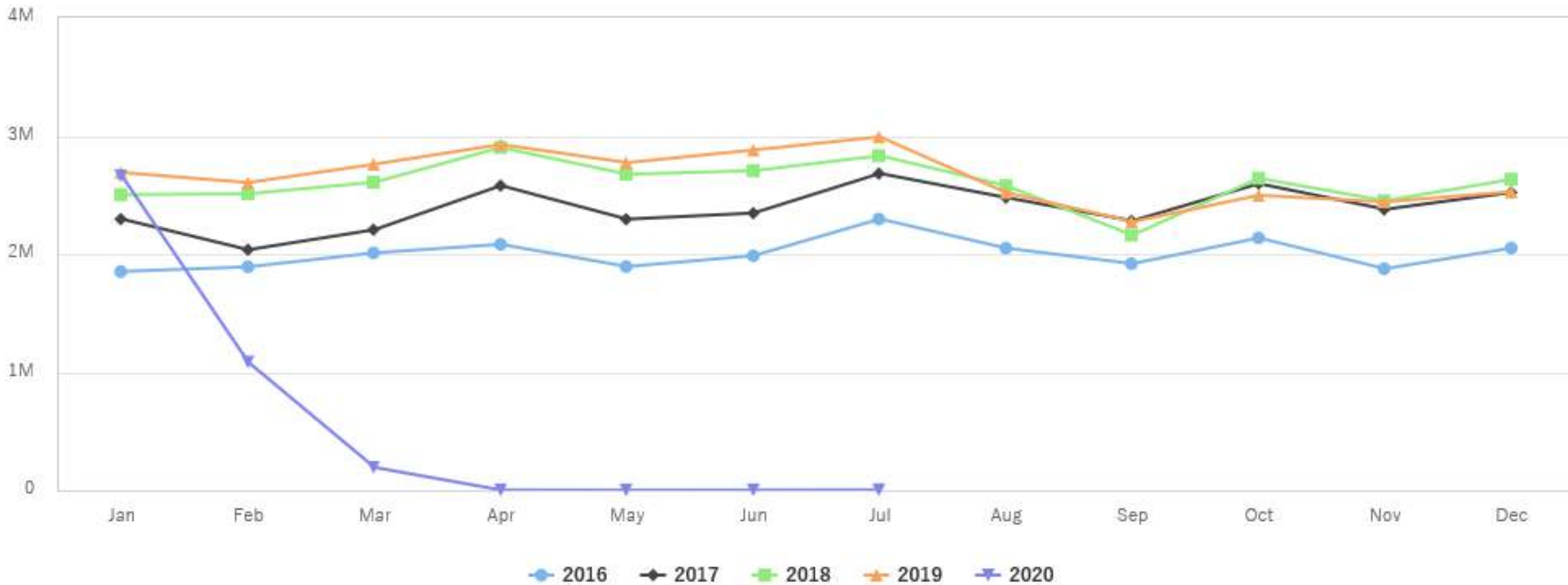
(note) Tables drafted by Ohno based on data from Japan's Ministry of Justice

Overseas Residents' Visits to Japan by Year (1964-2019)



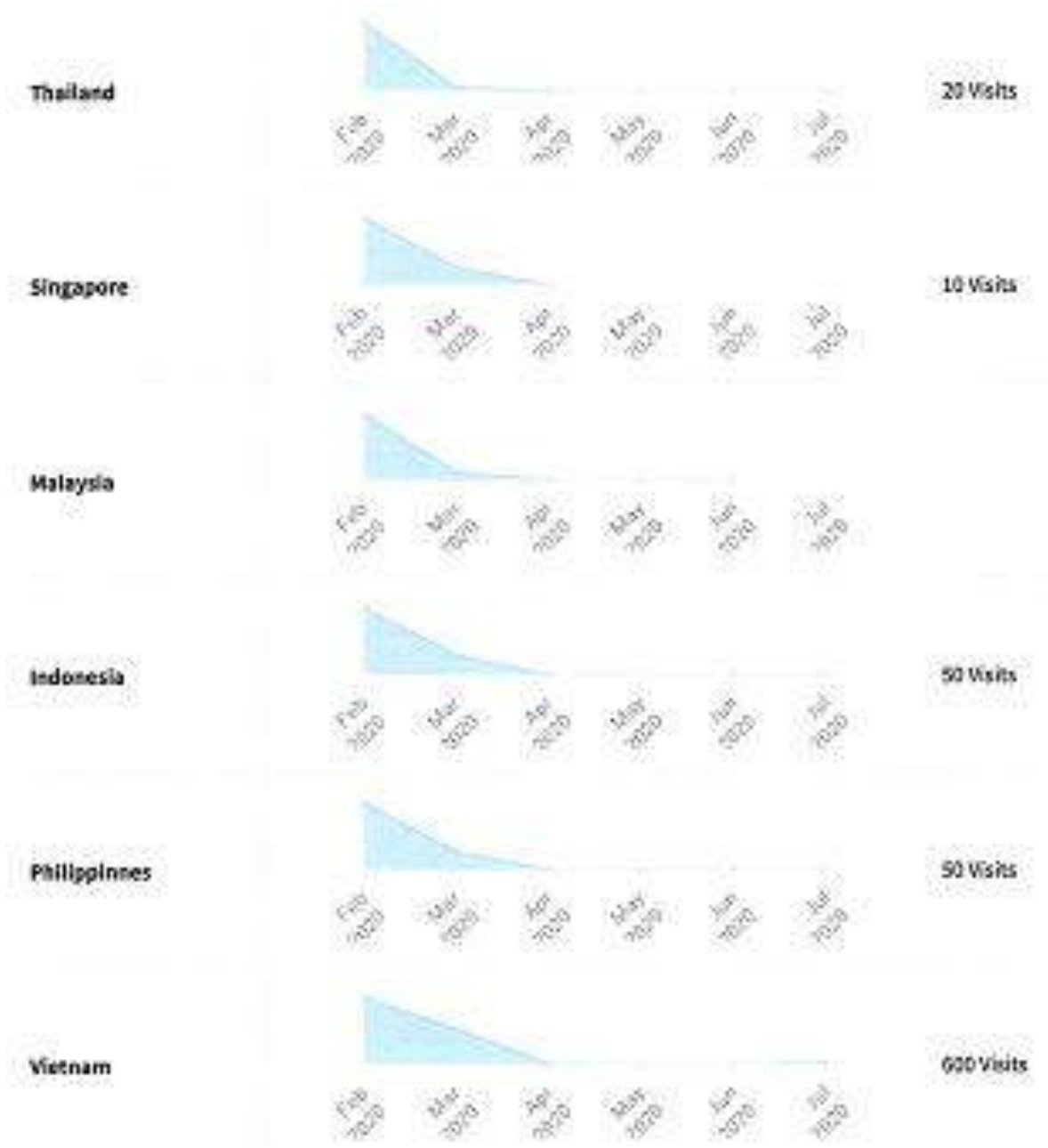
(source) Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020, “Japan-bound Statistics”.

Overseas Residents' Visits to Japan by Month (Jan. 2016~July 2020)



(source) Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020, “ Japan-bound Statistics”.

Overseas Residents' Visits to Japan by Country in July 2020



Total No. of Visits

April	2,917
May	1,663
June	2,565
July	3,800
August	8,700

(source) Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2020, “Japan-bound Statistics”.

Vietnamese Volunteers Supporting Lives of Their Fellow Citizens

The Buddhist nun, Ms. Thick Tam Tri, has been leading an emergency relief movement

According to Ms. Tam Tri, around 10,000 Vietnamese (former) technical intern trainees and another 8,000 Vietnamese wish to go back to their home land.

Her team collected 55 tons of rice, and distributed them to around 15,000 Vietnamese residents suffering from the shortage of their daily foods.

(my interview with her on 25 Aug.)

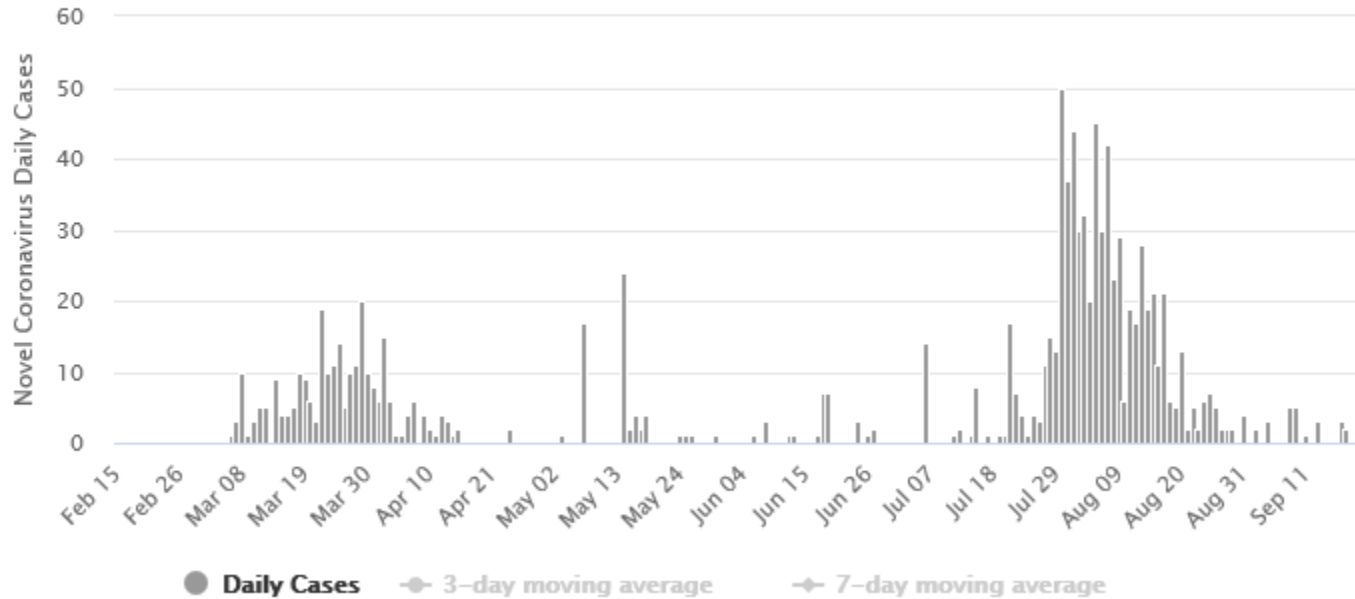
The Case of Vietnam as of 23 September

1,068 cases

35 deaths

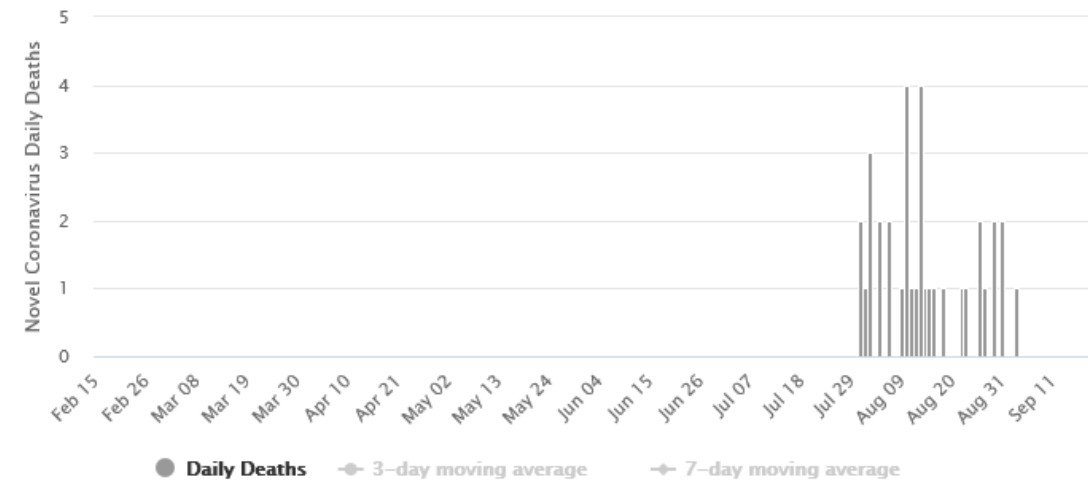
Daily New Cases

Cases per Day
Data as of 0:00 GMT+0



Daily Deaths

Deaths per Day
Data as of 0:00 GMT+8



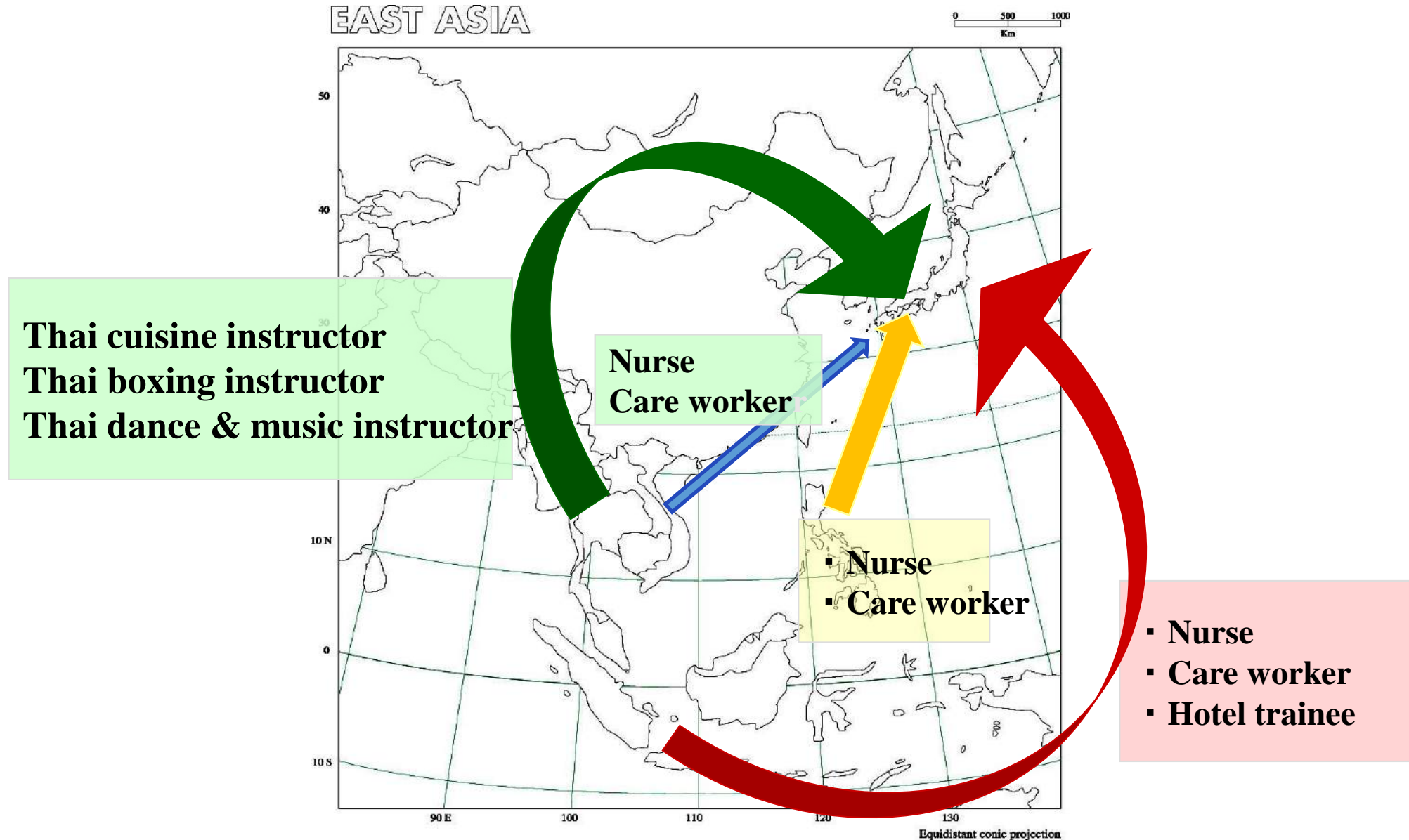
(source)worldometer, 2020, “WORLD/COUNTRIES/VIETNAM”

<<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/viet-nam>> accessed 23 Sep.2020.

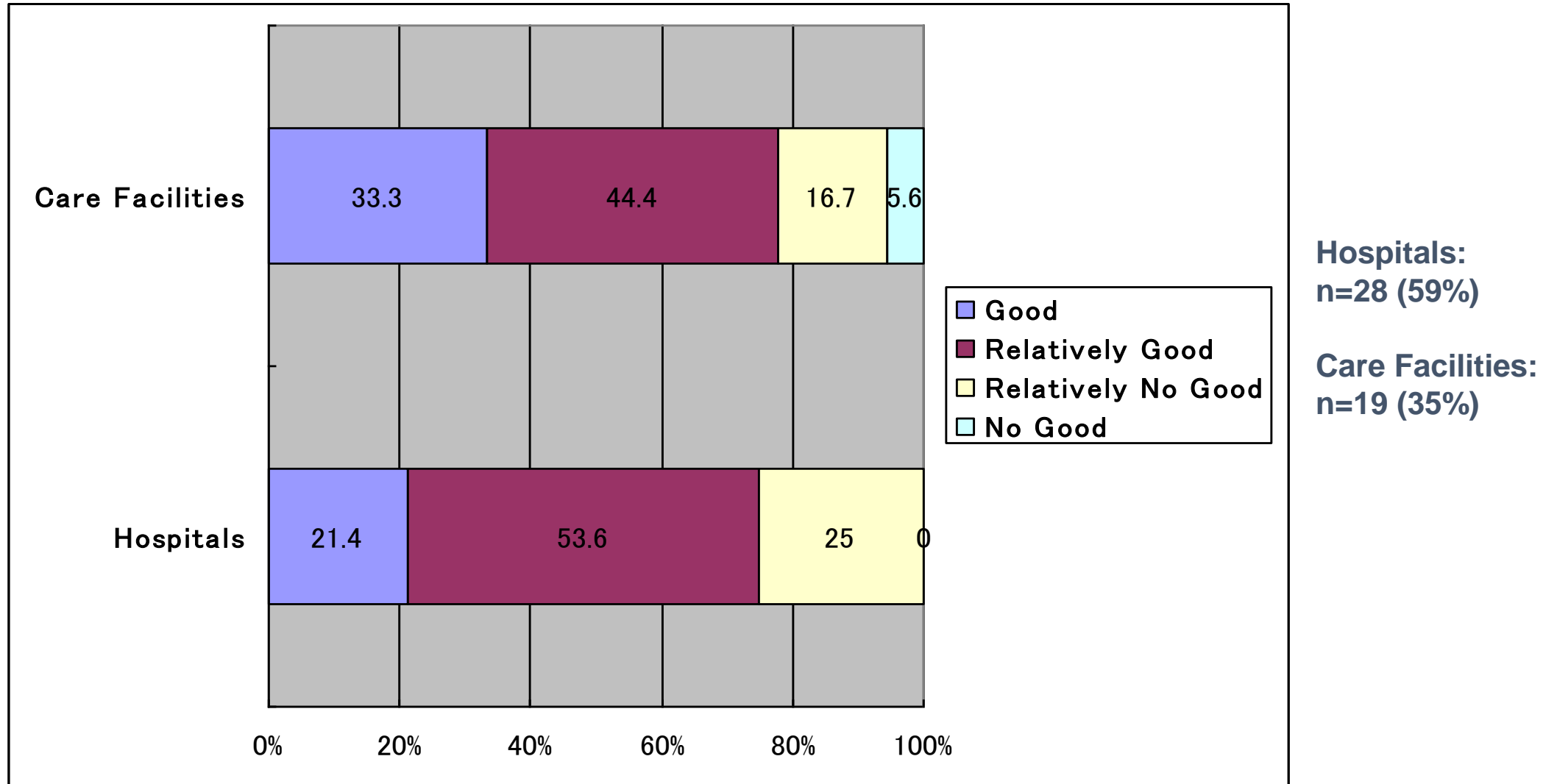
Tangible Differences Between Principles (*tatema* in Japanese) and Real Intentions (*hon'ne* in Japanese) over Technical Intern Trainees

- The Japanese government formally explains that it accepts “technical intern trainees” in order to transfer Japanese technology and skills to developing countries.
- In fact, technical intern trainees have been treated in many sectors as “cheap laborers” whose skills obtained in Japan are generally not well utilized after their return to their home country.
- Many cases of sudden dismissal of the trainees under the pandemic manifest that they are situated as “employment adjustment valves” [*koyō no chōsei-ben* in Japanese] in Japanese society.
- The same phenomenon has also happened on a lot of Nikkeijin and other foreign workers whose employment contracts were so short or even did not exist.

Movement of Southeast Asian Healthcare Workers to Japan under G-to-G Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) since 2008



Evaluations of 1st-batch Indonesian Workers 1 year after Assignment to the Workplace (Survey conducted in Jan. 2010)

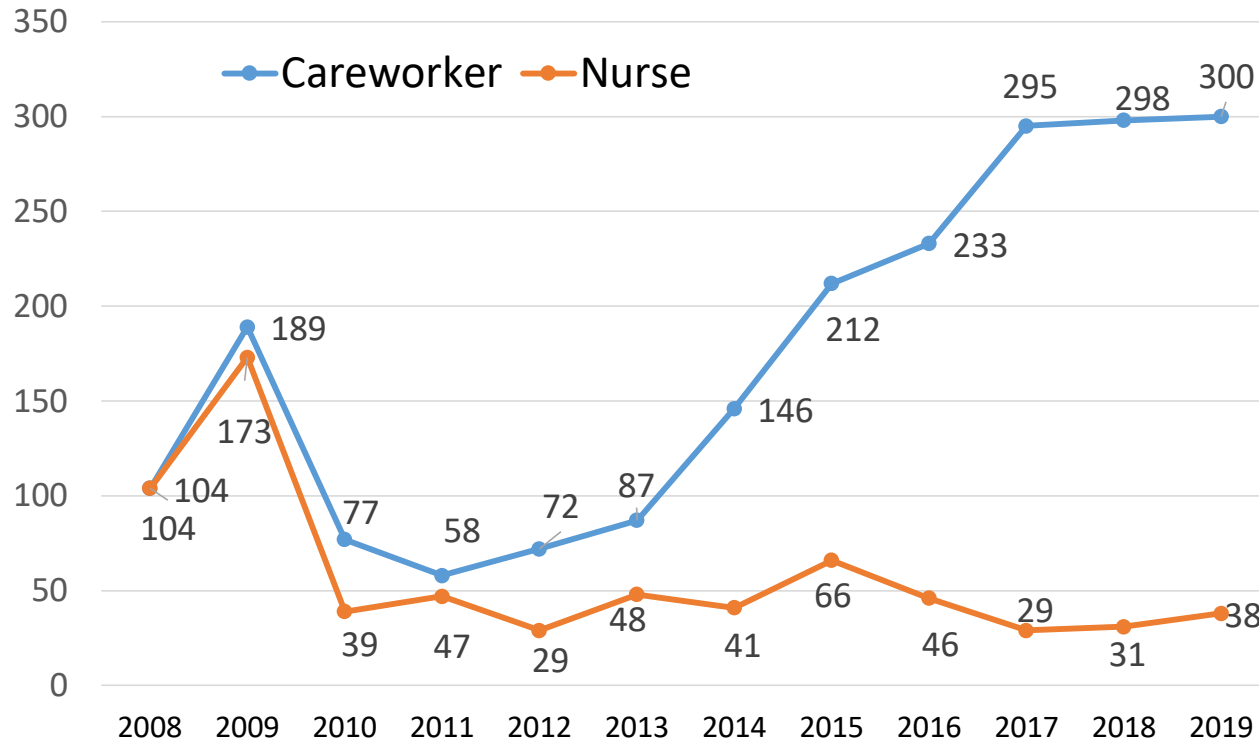


(Source) Ogawa, Reiko, Yuko Hirano, Yoshichika Kawaguchi, Shun Ohno, 2010, "A Follow-up Survey on Hospitals and Long-Term Care Facilities Accepting the First Batch of Indonesian Nurse/Certified Care Worker Candidates(1)", *Bulletin of Kyushu University Asia Center*, Vol.5: 85-98.

Transition of Numbers of Indonesian and Filipino Candidates for Certified Care Worker (*Kaigo-fukushishi*) and Registered Nurse under Japan's Economic Partnership Agreements with Southeast Asian Countries (2008-2019)

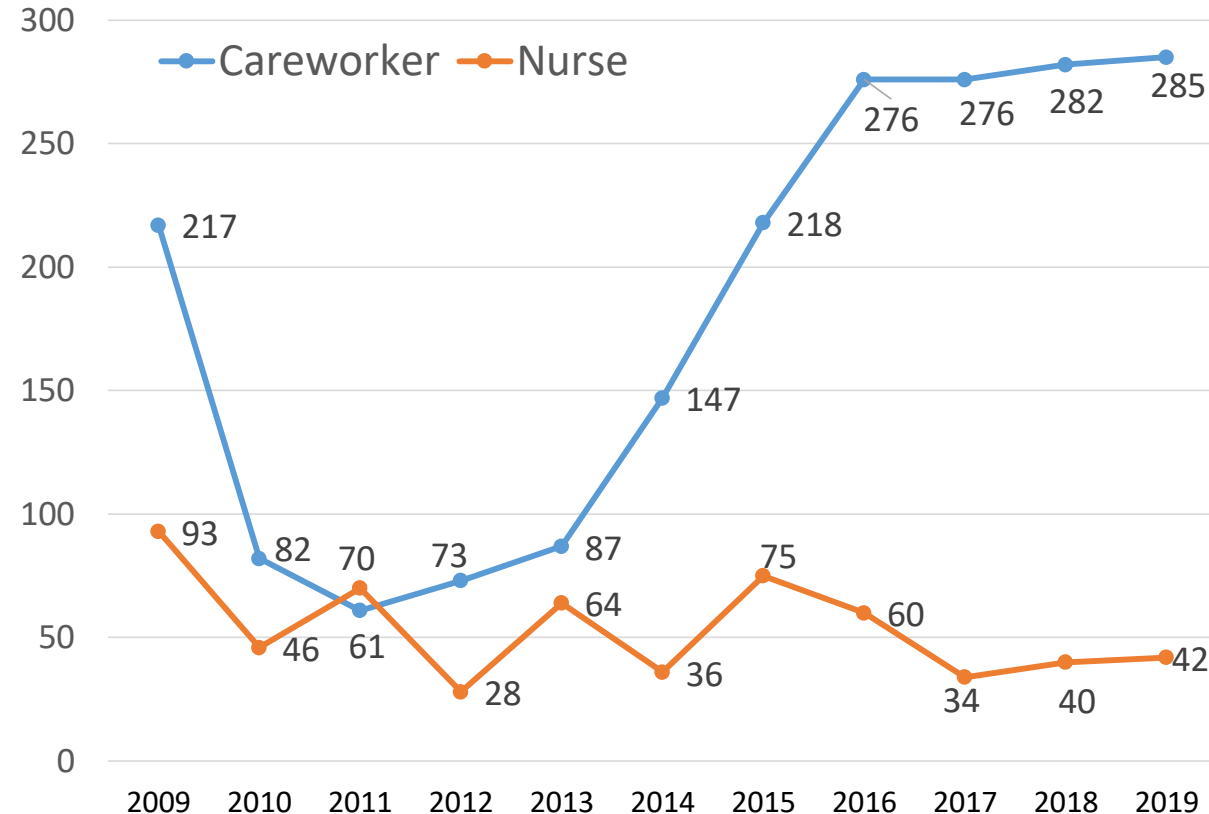
Indonesians

persons



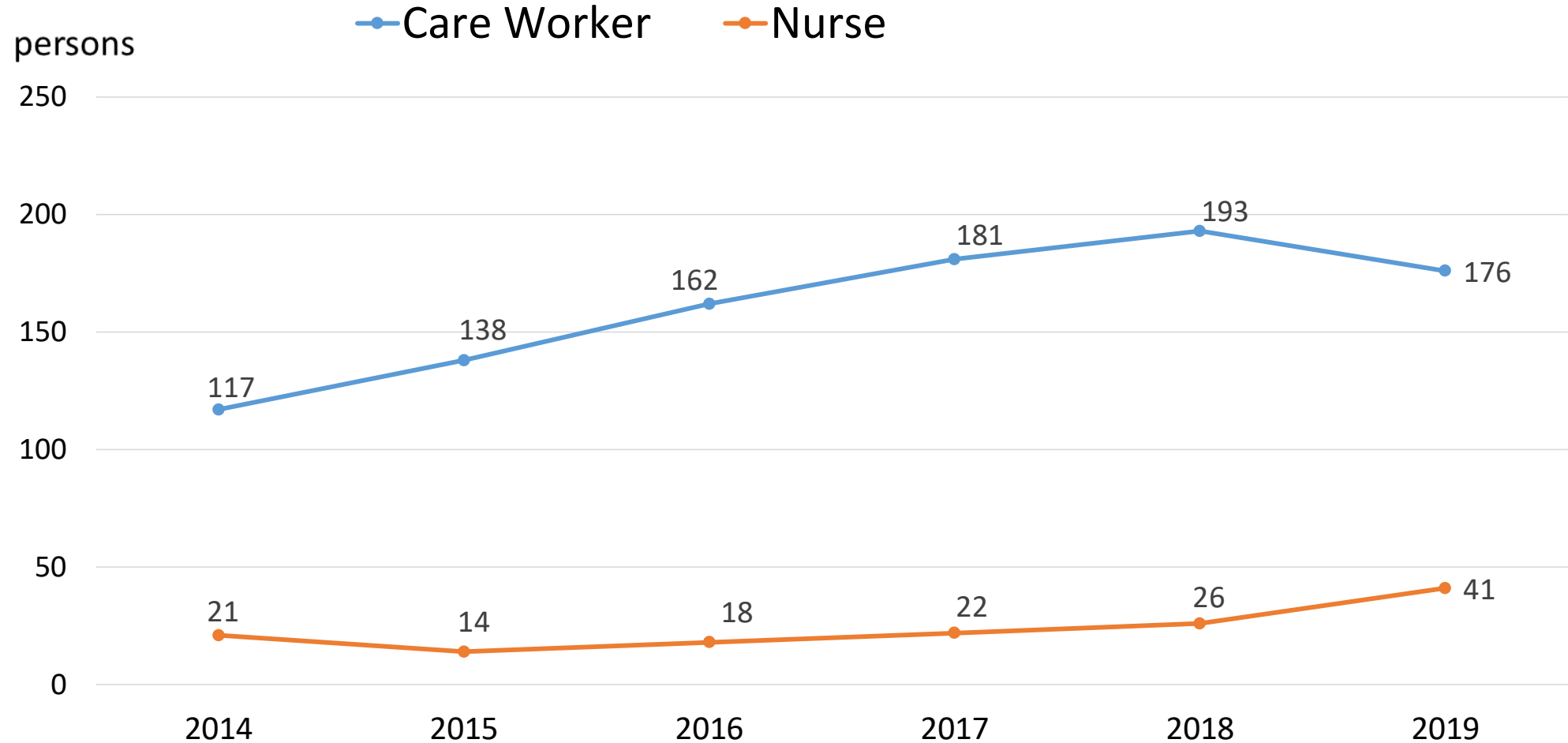
Filipinos

persons



(note) Data obtained from JICWELS (Japan Int'l Corporation of Welfare Services) official HP

Transition of Numbers of Vietnamese Candidates for Certified Care Worker and Registered Nurse under Japan-Vietnam EPA (2014-2019)



(note) Date obtained from JICWELS official HP

What are Japan's intentions for Implementation the Project of "Movement of Natural Persons" of Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs)

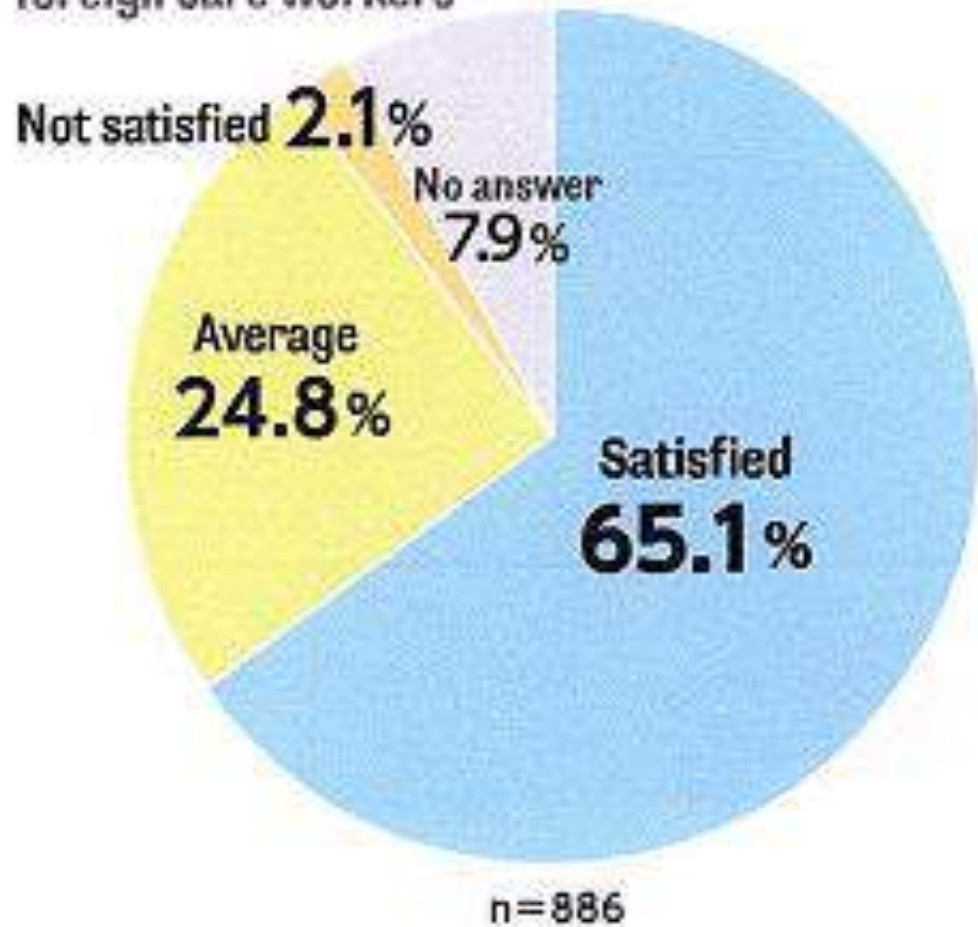
"Japan's acceptance[of workers] from these 3 countries does not intend to respond to labor shortage in nursing and care sectors (in Japan)". As a result of negotiations based on strong demands by partner countries [such as the Philippines and Indonesia], it implements from the viewpoint of strengthening cooperation for economic activities"

(source) Official homepage of Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

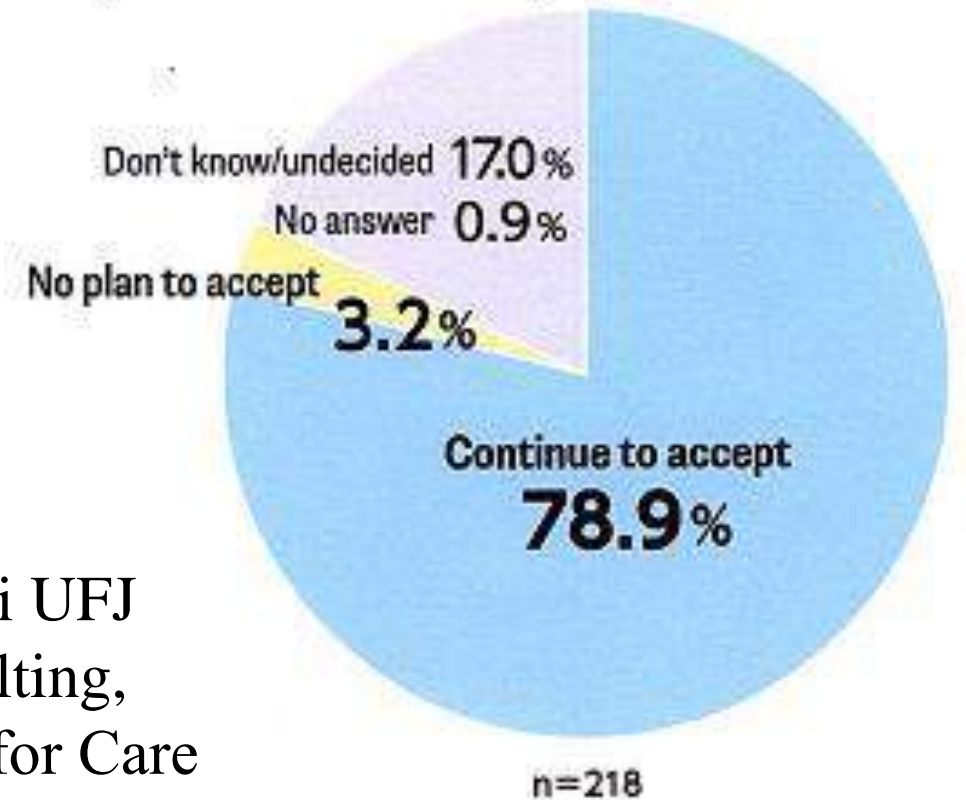
Good Assessment of Foreign Care Workers by Users and Their Family Members

Most Employers Expressed Their Wishes to Continue to Accept EPA Care Workers

Quality of long-term care services provided by foreign care workers



Long-term care facilities employing EPA Care Workers



(source) Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, 2019, "Guidebook for Care Service Providers on Employment of Foreign Care Workers", pp.4-5.

EPA and 3 Other Schemes for Employing Care Workers from Abroad

In 2019, the Japanese government made a plan to accept 60,000 care workers at a maximum for next 5 years as “Specified Skilled Workers”.

They are required to acquire a certain level of Japanese language and care knowledge.

(source) Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, 2019, “Guidebook for Care Service Providers on Employment of Foreign Care Workers”, p.2.

Visa Categories

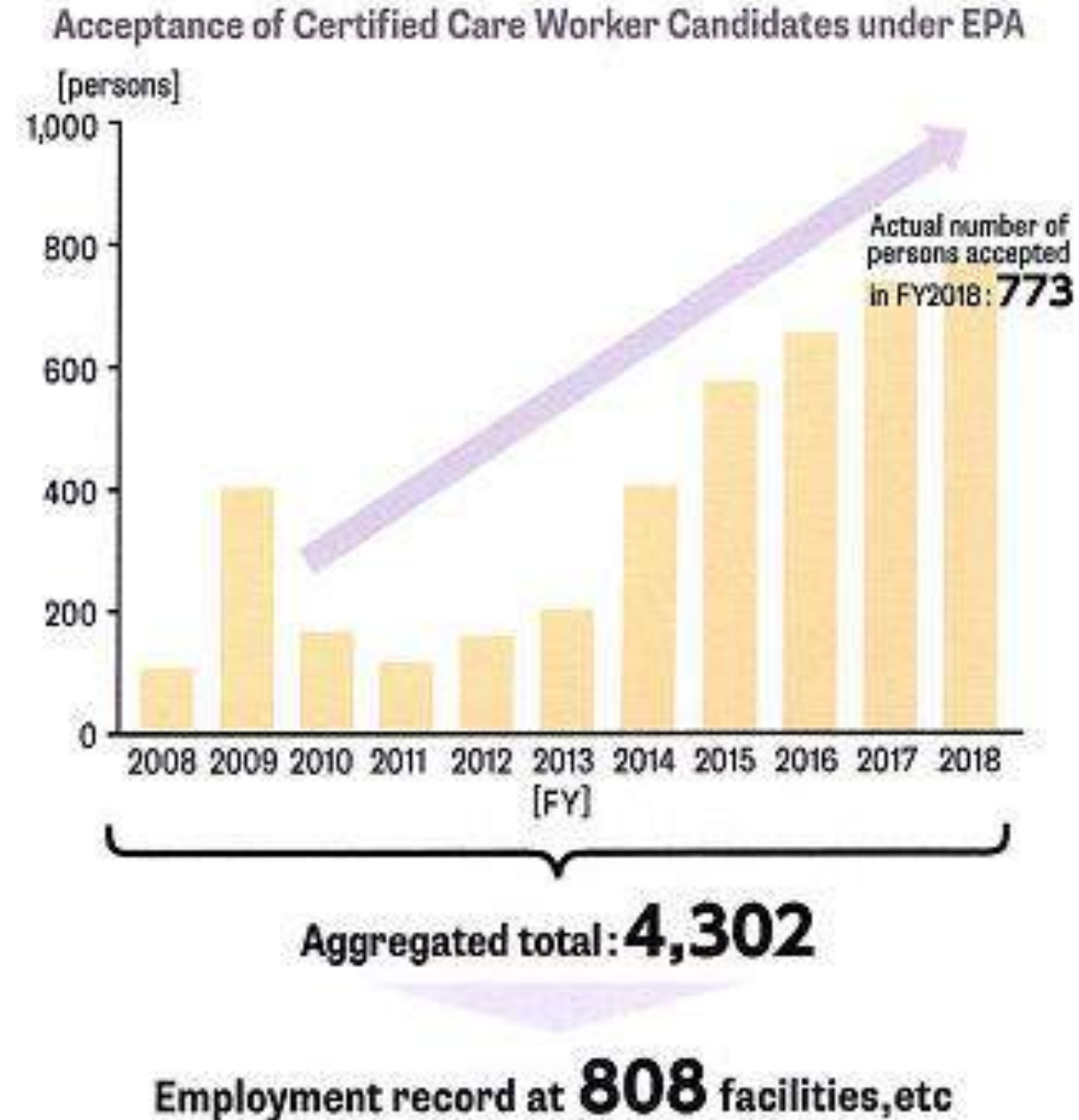
Does the foreign care worker available for employment have **certified care worker qualification**?

Can the foreign care worker **work permanently**?

EPA	<p>Employment of Certified Care Worker Candidates under Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA)</p> <p>→ go to page 6</p>	<p>N/A</p> <p>However, the aim is to obtain qualification</p>	<p>After obtaining qualification, Permanent employment is possible</p> <p><small>if qualification is not obtained within certain period, return to home country</small></p>
Nursing Care	<p>Employment of foreigners who graduated a certified care worker training school in Japan and have “Nursing Care” status of residence</p> <p>→ go to page 7</p>	<p>Certified Care Worker</p>	<p>Permanent employment is possible</p>
Technical Intern Training	<p>Employment of foreigners using the Technical Intern Training Program (technical intern trainee)</p> <p>→ go to page 8</p>	<p>N/A</p> <p>Eligible to take examination if practical requirements, etc. are met</p>	<p>5 years maximum</p> <p>*1 *2</p>
Specified Skilled Worker	<p>Employment of foreigners with “Specified Skilled Worker (i)” status of residence</p> <p>→ go to page 9</p>	<p>N/A</p> <p>Eligible to take examination if practical requirements, etc. are met</p>	<p>5 years maximum</p> <p>*1 *2</p>

The cumulative number of certified care worker candidates entering Japan from Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam under EPAs was more than 5,000 (as of 2019)

(source) Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, 2019, “Guidebook for Care Service Providers on Employment of Foreign Care Workers”, p.4.

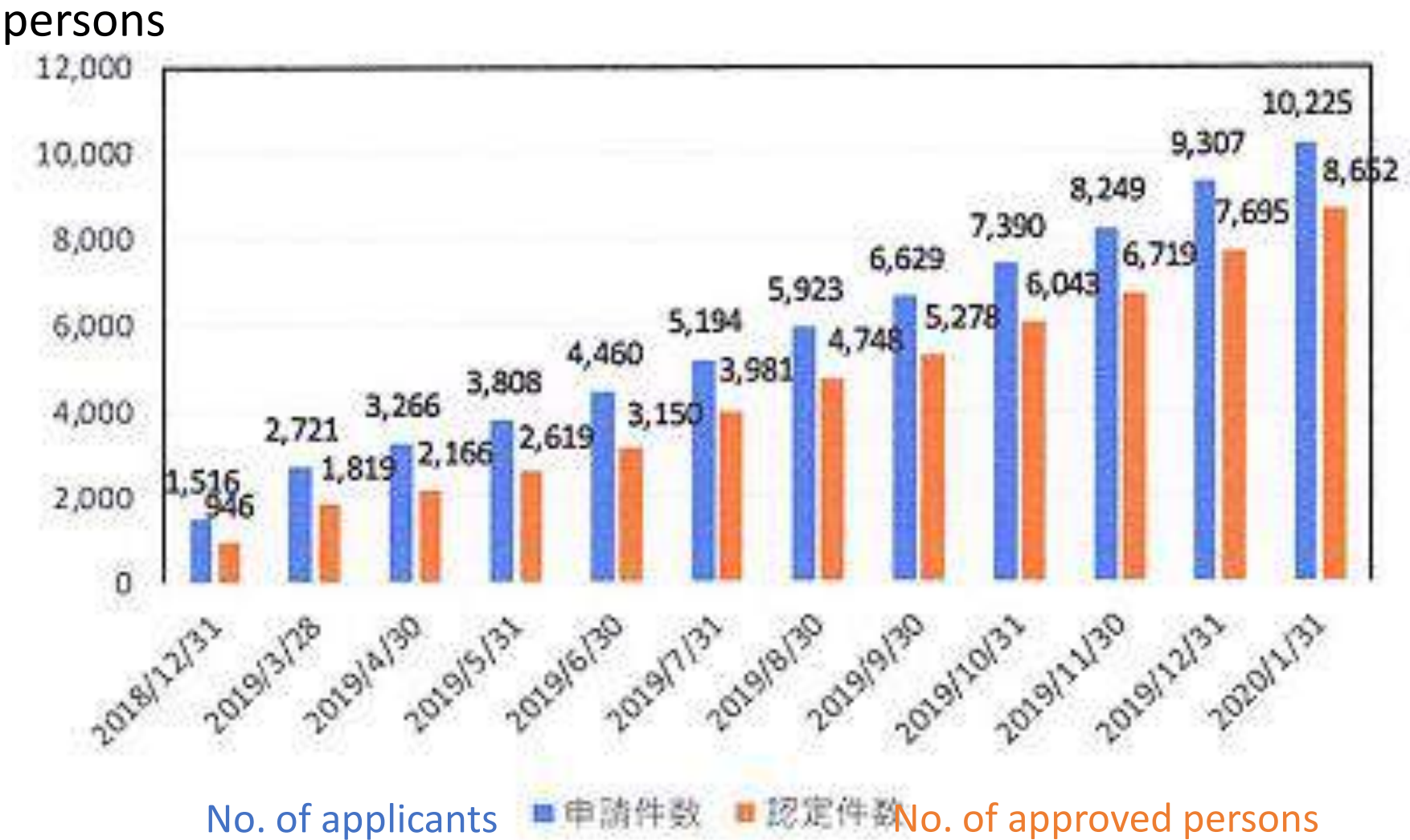


Prospect for Supply and Demand of Care Workers in Japan

(persons)	2017	2020	2025
Supply	1.95 million	2.06 million	2.15 million
Demand	2.08 million	2.26 million	2.53 million
Shortage	0.12 million	0.20 million	0.377 million
Fulfillment Rate	94%	91%	85%

(Source) Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2015, "Prospects for supply and demand of care human resources towards 2025"

The number of technical intern trainees in care sector already surpassed that of EPA care workers



(source) Mitsubishi UFJ Research & Consulting, 2019, “Guidebook for Care Service Providers on Employment of Foreign Care Workers”.

Japan's Recent Measures for Resuming Cross-Border Travel

▽ “Residence Track” - A framework which allows the resumption of cross-border travel

Commenced with Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Taiwan by mid-September 2020

▽ “Business Track” - A framework which enables limited business activities

Commenced with Singapore on 18 Sep.2020

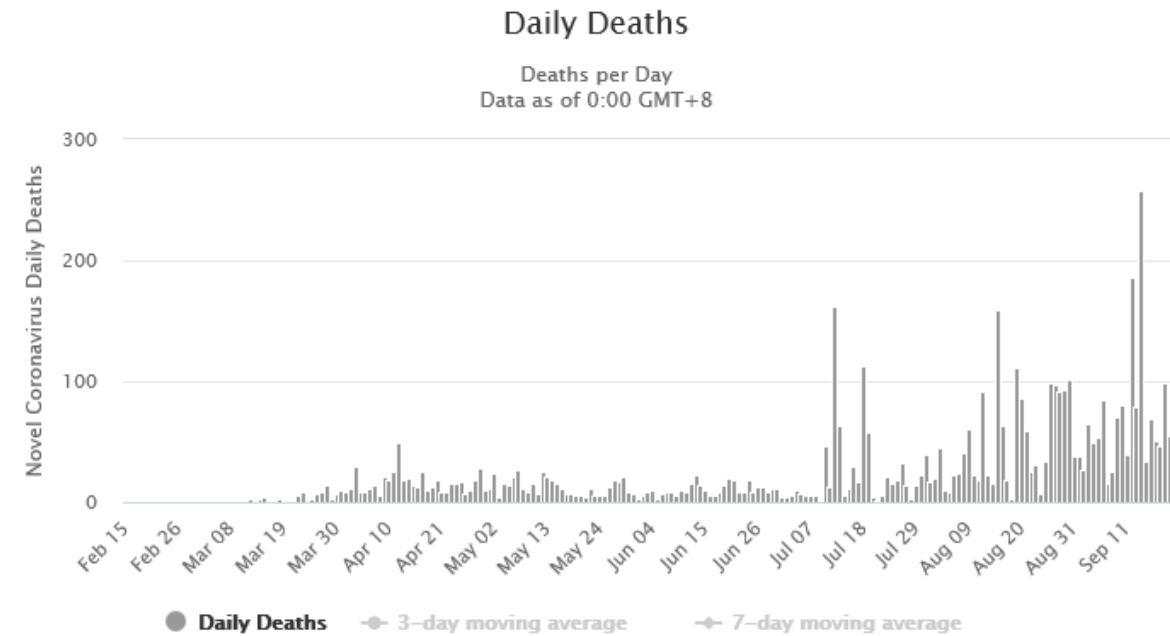
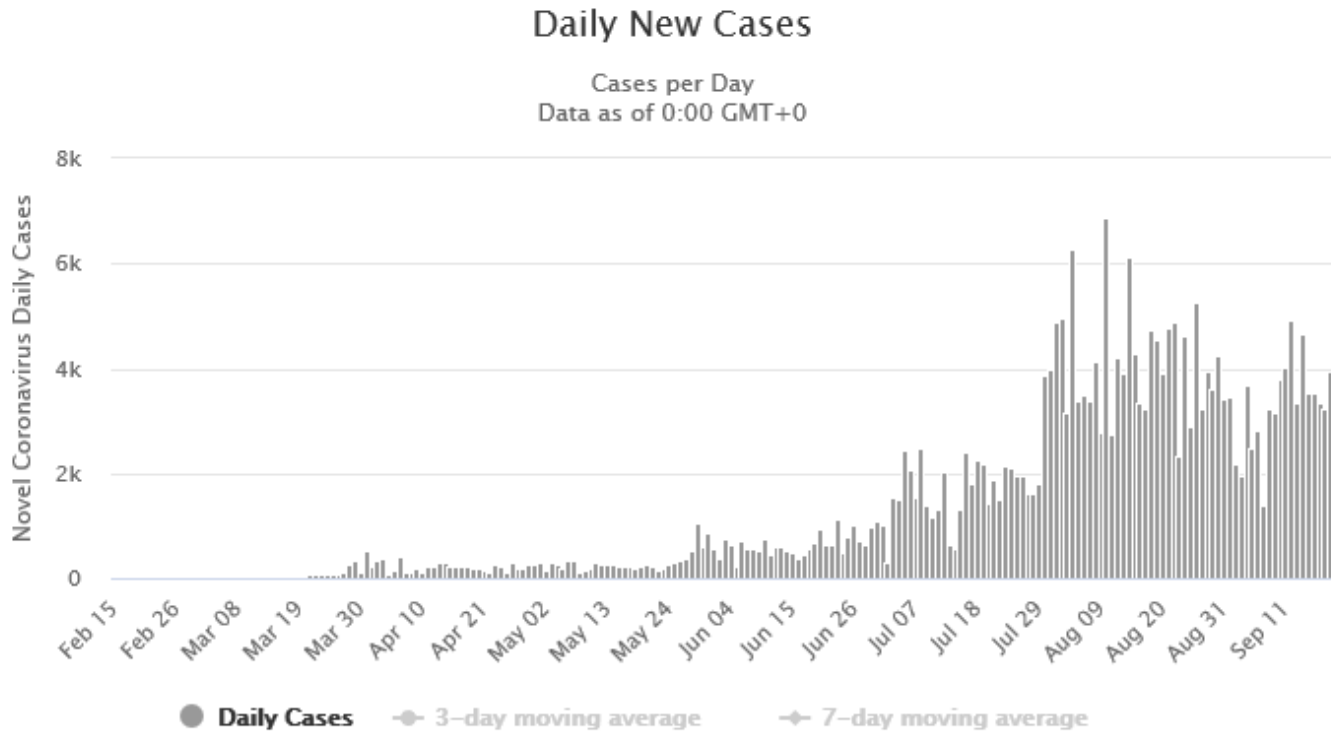
(note) The Japanese government has been also consulting with governments of China, Hong Kong, Macao, South Korea, Mongol, Brunei, Australia and New Zealand

(source) Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (official HP), 2020, “Phased Measures for Resuming Cross-Border Travel”.

The Case of the Philippines as of 23 September

291,789 cases

5,049 deaths



(source)worldometer, 2020, “WORLD/COUNTRIES/PHILIPPINES”

<<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/Philippines>>, accessed 23 Sep.2020.

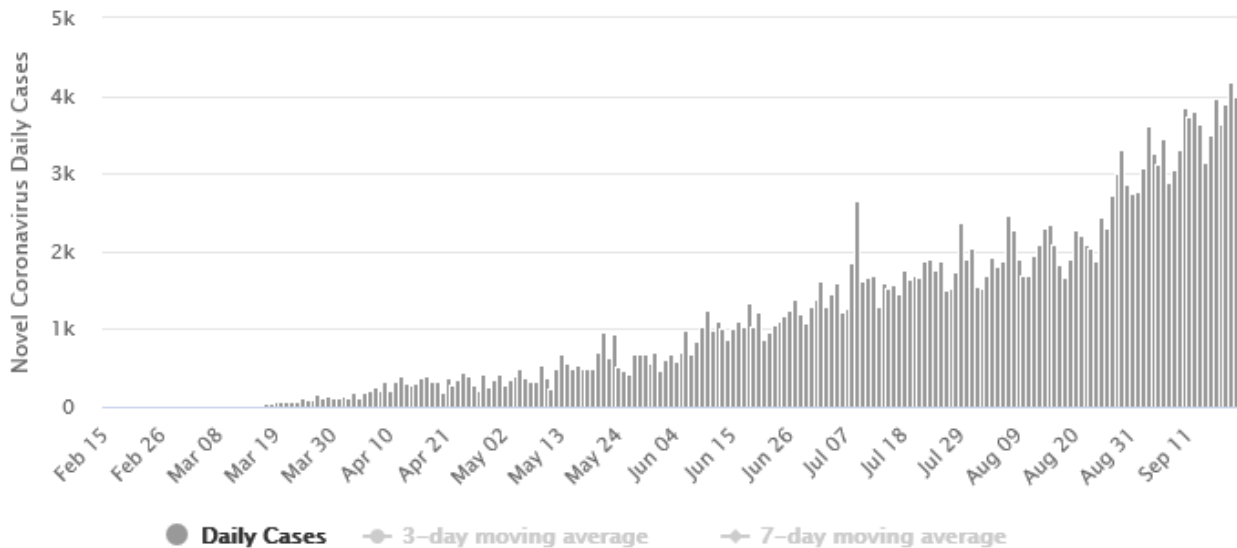
The Case of Indonesia as of 23 September

252,923 cases

9,837 deaths

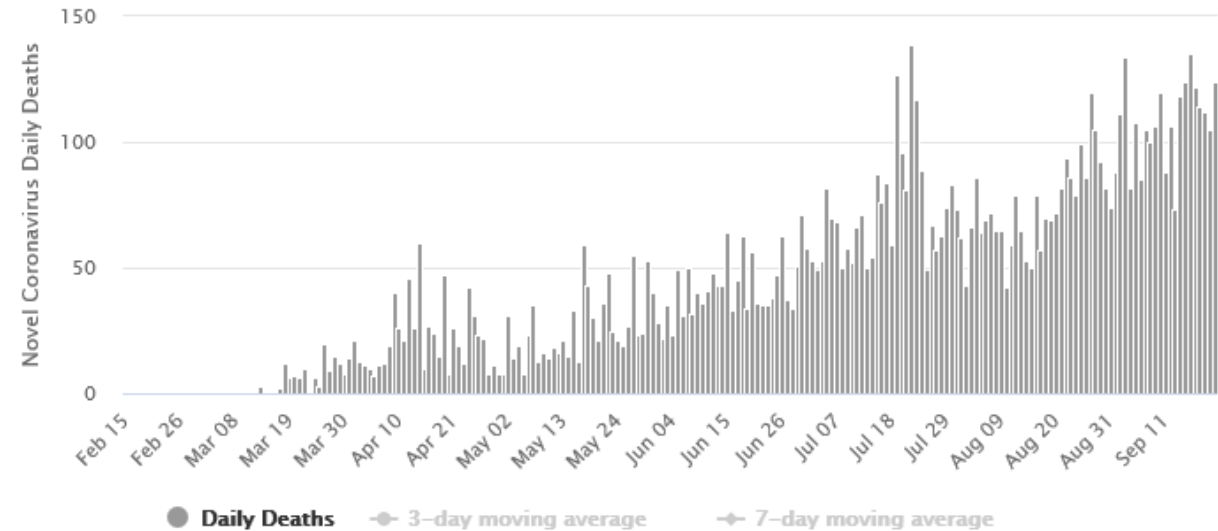
Daily New Cases

Cases per Day
Data as of 0:00 GMT+0



Daily Deaths

Deaths per Day
Data as of 0:00 GMT+8



(source)worldometer, 2020, "WORLD/COUNTRIES/INDONESIA"

< <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/indonesia> > accessed 23 Sep.2020.

Reasons behind Longtime Standby of Asian Workers Bound for Japan

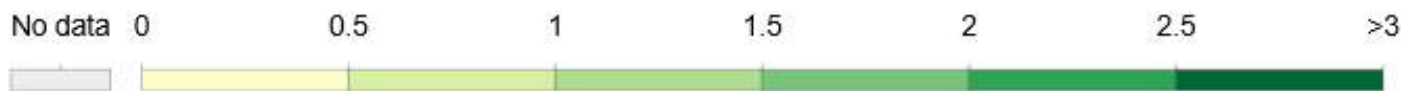
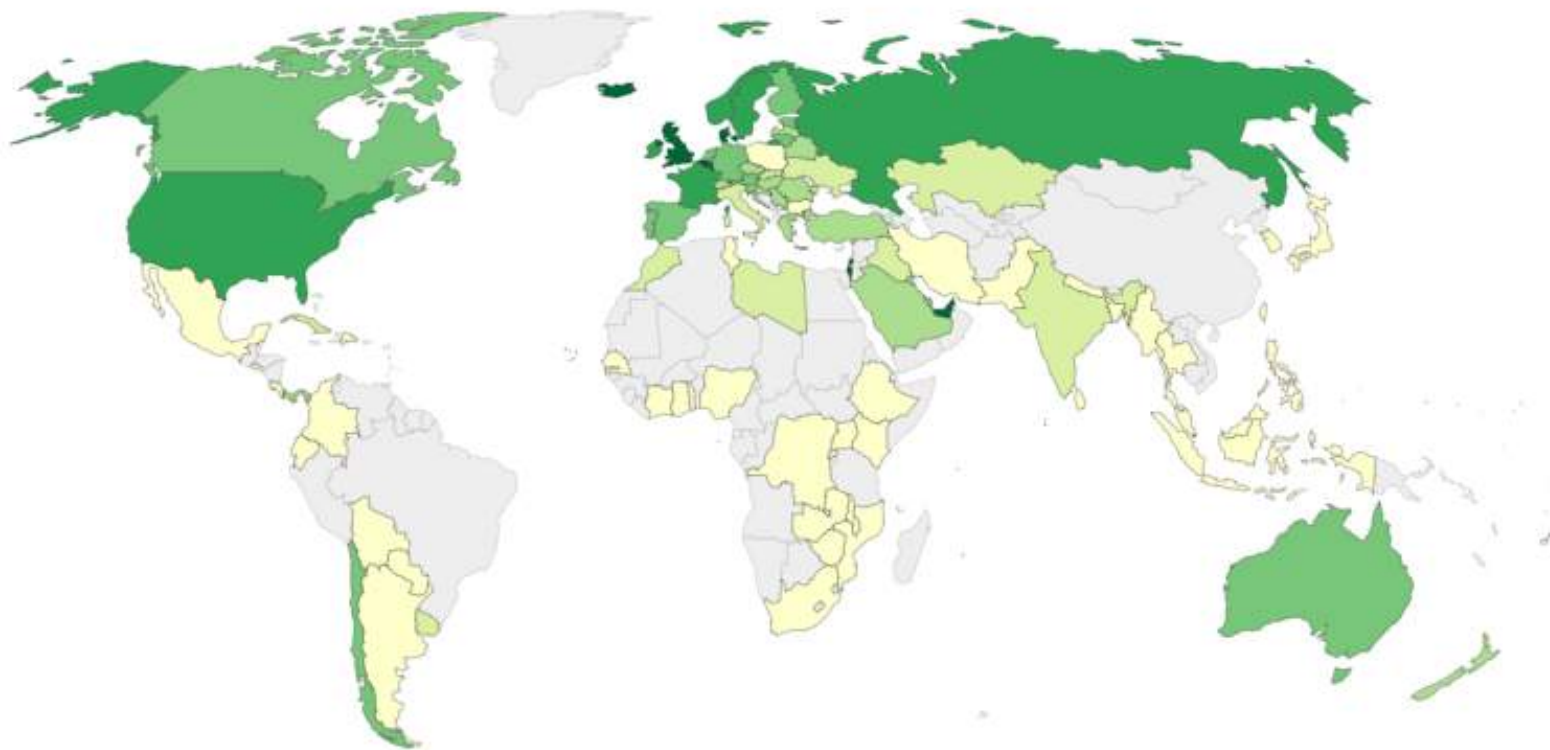
- (1) The former Abe Administration explains that it does not adopt so-called “migration policy” (*Imin Seisaku* in Japanese), and thus it does not have a specified ministry (department) for comprehensive migrant affairs. As a result, governmental agencies in charge of EPAs and other projects for incoming foreign workers are too many. Thus, it takes a lot of time for coordination and new arrangements to accept those workers under “vertically segmented administration”.
- (2) Japan has quite limited capability for coronavirus quarantine tests for incoming travelers at its international airports and thus can't process many arrivals. International flight tickets are too expensive for workers and employers to purchase.
- (3) Some Japanese employers face the difficulties to secure appropriate accommodations having private rooms for quarantine of their foreign employees for 2 weeks upon their arrival in Japan. It costs a big amount, and will be too heavy burdens especially for employing small companies.

The number of Japan's COVID-19 tests is smaller than those of other developed countries

Daily COVID-19 tests per thousand people, Jan 8, 2020 to Sep 18, 2020

The figures are given as a rolling 7-day average.

Our World
in Data



Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data

Note: Comparisons of testing data across countries are affected by differences in the way the data are reported. Daily data is interpolated for countries not reporting testing data on a daily basis. Details can be found at our Testing Dataset page.

OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

(source) Our World in Data, 2020, “Coronavirus(COVID-19) Testing”

<<https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-testing>>, accessed 20 Sep.2020.

Controversy over Deployment Ban for Workers Bound for Abroad in the Philippines

- Data from Philippines' Department of Health shows that 204,437 are active in the health sector, while 543,495 are not practicing their professions.



- The huge number of healthcare workers including members of Philippine Nurses Association and Filipino Nurses United calls for a thorough review of their government's deployment ban policy.
- (source) The Manila Times(web), 30 Aug.2020, "500K medical workers jobless" <<https://bit.ly/31UjkG5>>, accessed 2 Sep. 2020.

“Nationalism” from Upper VS “Better Family Lives” from Below

Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque announced:

“▪▪ in a time of pandemic, the nationalism of our nurses will prevail ... I hope the health professionals will take that into consideration, that no one will attend to their families if health workers are needed” (INQUIRER NET, 13 Sep.2020)

A 36-year-old Filipina female nurse having children based in UK:

“I’ve served my country already. I don’t want to be a hero again.

I am looking out for the future of my children.” (Reuters, 16 Sep.2020)

Concluding Remarks ①

- When I saw a number of unemployed and underemployed migrants stranded in Japan under the pandemic, I recalled **Max Frisch**'s famous words, “**We asked for workers, but human beings came**”.

The narratives of Vietnamese ex-technical intern trainees and others having nowhere to go demonstrate that they are situated as “employment adjustment valves” in Japanese society.

- On the hands, the narratives of Filipino nurses heading to Japan reveal their serious dilemma between their wishes to seek their better life and their government's deployment ban policy for its national interest.

Concluding Remarks ②

- Their prolonged standby in their homelands seems to result partly from Japan's absence of its comprehensive migration policy and vertically segmented administration for migrant affairs as well as its limited capability for coronavirus.
- Filipino nurses and other healthcare workers' harsh criticism against their government's deployment ban policy reflect how difficult lives in their home country even before the outbreak of the pandemic.
- The treatment of “essential workers” bound for abroad is becoming a more sensitive political issue in sending countries. The longtime labor-exporting policy adopted by those government and the wills & seriousness of the Japanese government accepting “human beings” from its neighboring countries are tested now.

Concluding Remarks ③

I sympathize with the following views made public by WHO Emergencies Director Michael Ryan at his virtual briefing on 27 July 2020:

“It is going to be almost impossible for individual countries to keep their borders shut for the foreseeable future”

"Continuing to keep international borders sealed is not necessarily a sustainable strategy for the world's economy, for the world's poor, or for anybody else”

References

- Ohno, Shun, 2020, “Southeast Asian Workers on the Ground of Pandemic-Stricken Medical and Nursing Care Services in Japan: Their Daily Lives and Concerns”, *CSEAS (Center for Southeast Asian Studies) NEWSLETTER*, 78: TBC.
- Ohno, Shun, 2012, “Southeast Asian Nurses and Caregiving Workers Transcending the National Boundaries: An Overview of Indonesian and Filipino Workers in Japan and Abroad”, *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol.49, No.4, pp.541-569.
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