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# Chamber of Commerce: Plans to bring East European construction workers 'could harm Sino-Israeli relations'

• By JOANNA PARASZCZUK

The Chamber of Commerce warned the Knesset Control Committee on Tuesday that government plans to bring thousands of skilled construction workers from Bulgaria and Romania could damage Israel's relations with China.

Chamber of Commerce Vice-President attorney Dan Carmeli said that the Chinese ambassador has held several meetings recently with Chamber of Commerce President Uriel Lynn, in which the Chinese declared their willingness to enter into negotiations to bring construction workers into Israel.

The Chinese have already prepared a draft agreement with Israel on the issue, Carmeli noted. Back in August, Lin expressed his opposition to the inter-ministerial committee's decision to bring Sri Lankan workers to Israel, partly on the grounds that the move would damage relations between Israel and China.

"Israel is trying not to implement government decisions, by turning the state into a manpower agency," said Carmeli. The State Control Committee convened its second meeting to discuss the inter-ministerial committee's decision to import

construction workers from Sri Lanka to Israel, a move which goes against the government's decision to bring workers from Romania and Bulgaria.

Present at the meeting were representatives from various government ministries, including the Construction and Housing and Foreign Ministries, as well as from contractors, manpower, and social organizations, including workers' rights NGO Kav LaOved ("Worker's Hotline").

As the country faces the twin pressures of a housing shortage and soaring real estate prices, the government and building contractors want to bring 8,000 construction workers to Israel to build residential units across the country, increasing the housing supply.

At the start of the meeting, Housing Ministry representative Yossi Shevet said that the government has already begun talks with the Bulgarian authorities, and had signed a preliminary agreement with that country. The government plans to sign a similar agreement with Romania and possibly Hungary, Shevet noted.

A government delegation is currently in Bulgaria to discuss the bilateral agreement between the two countries, according to Racheli Shani, who attended the meeting on

behalf of the Foreign Ministry. Shani said that the process would be completed in "a few weeks," barring any objections from ministers.

However, the government's move to sign bilateral agreements with Romania and Bulgaria over foreign workers has drawn criticism from several groups.

However, the move to import skilled construction workers from Eastern Europe and Sri Lanka has drawn criticism from several groups.

While the Chamber of Commerce warned of possible damage to Sino-Israeli relations, the Union of Professional Construction Personnel Companies (UPCPC), accused the state of charging workers exorbitant fees while claiming to protect their rights.

Eldad Nitzan, UPCPC chairman, claimed workers are charged around \$3,000 in fees to come to Israel.

Idit Lebovitch, representing Kav LaOved, also told the meeting that Chinese workers currently pay high fees to work in Israel and added that those fees are not connected to their profession or particular skills.

According to Kav LaOved, foreign workers pay exorbitant fees to brokers or employment agencies to arrange their work in Israel and ensure that they

receive residency permits.

Notably, in 2006, Kav LaOved filed a High Court of Justice petition against the state, claiming that the government had failed to prevent contractors from taking hefty fees from foreign workers. That petition is still pending.

Control Committee Chairman MK Ronnie Bar-On (Kadima) said that the government needed to take into account contractors' demands and also should allow social organizations to take part in discussions over bilateral agreements.

"It is the state's responsibility to combat the phenomenon of brokers who charge workers exorbitant fees, and contractors and social NGOs must be involved in the solution," said Bar-On. "Agreements with Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary are important, and must be signed quickly because any delay could lead to new problems."

Attorney Tehila Logar of the Interior Ministry's Legal Department claimed in response that the government is trying to eradicate the fee system by signing the bilateral agreements.

In response to criticism from the ACMC's legal adviser, attorney Doron Raubman, who said the association was "unwilling to give up selecting its own employees directly," which he

added would be a concern if the government was responsible for importing foreign workers, Logar said the bilateral agreements would help bring skilled construction workers to Israel.

"We are doing everything we can to bring to Israel only those workers whose professional skills match the sector in which they want to work," said Logar, adding that the manpower contractors' role "is only to employ workers once they are in Israel, not bring them into the country."

Several members of the Control Committee also expressed some opposition to the government's scheme.

Control Committee member MK Marina Solodkin (Kadima) said that she was opposed to bringing foreign workers into Israel, and added that the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor should promote and encourage the development of skilled Israeli workers.

"I would like to ask why the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor is not opening schools for Israeli construction workers," Solodkin said.

MK Yoel Hasson (Kadima) dubbed Israel's importing foreign construction workers "a dark world that should be avoided," but said it was preferable that the country allow skilled Chinese workers.