

Riot forces Singapore to take fresh look at foreign workers

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Two South Asian workers read the newspaper while their friends play a cricket game on the field next to Little India district in Singapore on Sunday. — AFP

SINGAPORE — A riot by South Asian laborers has forced Singapore to take a fresh look at how it deals with the presence of nearly a million low-paid foreign workers in the wealthy city-state.

An estimated 400 workers went on the rampage on December 8 in a district known as Little India, injuring 39 people, including police officers, and destroying 25 vehicles.

The riot – the first in more than 40 years in the country – erupted after an Indian man was killed by a bus in an area where tens of thousands of workers converge at weekends.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has ordered an investigation into the cause of the violence as well as a review of measures to manage areas where foreign workers congregate.

Police have questioned nearly 4,000 workers and filed charges against at least 33 Indian nationals over the riot. “We need the foreign workers,” Lee said Thursday, referring to

criticism from some Singaporeans who see them as a problem.

“If we didn’t have them, we would not be able to achieve our housing plans, or our public transport plans, and Singaporeans would be severely affected.”

Singapore has a total population of 5.4 million, but only 3.84 million are citizens and permanent residents. Out of the foreign population of 1.55 million, about 700,000 are work-permit holders employed in construction and other sectors shunned by Singaporeans, with more than 200,000 others working as domestics. Latest available official data showed that resident foreigners and foreign companies contributed a total of 44 percent to Singapore’s gross domestic product (GDP) of Sg\$334.1 billion (\$266 billion) in 2011. Its GDP stood at Sg\$345.6 billion in 2012.

Eugene Tan, an associate law professor at the Singapore Management University, said it was “now a bigger challenge to maintain the large foreign workforce”.

Tan, a social commentator who is also an appointed member of parliament, said: “There will be public expectation to reduce further the number of foreign workers.”

The long-ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has already faced intense public pressure over a foreign worker influx in recent years.

In the May 2011 general election, the PAP suffered its worst-ever performance after the large foreign presence became a hot issue.

Authorities have since been phasing in various measures to cap foreign worker inflows.

“Quite certainly, the next general election will see immigration being a major election issue,” Tan said.

Officials have so far characterized the riot, Singapore’s first since racial disturbances in 1969, as an isolated incident involving a drunken crowd in Little India. — AFP