Belarusian Ruler Introduces Forced Employment

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BORISOV, Belarus (AP) — Vladimir Dodonov wants to flee Belarus for neighboring Russia before it becomes illegal to leave his job at a wood-processing plant.

Belarus' authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, has decided to stem an exodus of qualified workers to Russia, starting by banning those who work in wood-processing industries from quitting. Critics have compared the measure to serfdom and warned that it would only deepen the former Soviet republic's economic troubles and fuel protests against Lukashenko.

Dodonov, 37, who earns the equivalent of $140 a month at the Borisovdrev plant, says he could make several times as much in Russia and would have left earlier if he hadn't had to care for his ailing mother. "How can you survive on such a miserable salary?" he said this week. "Naturally, I'm thinking about leaving for Russia before they turn me into a slave."

It could be too late.

"You will be sentenced to compulsory labor and sent back here if you leave," Lukashenko warned Friday during a visit to the plant, located in the industrial city of Borisov, about 70 kilometers (some 45 miles) east of the Belarusian capital, Minsk.

The president said his decree would apply to more than 13,000 employees of nine state-run wood-processing plants and 2,000-3,000 construction workers involved in modernizing them. Lukashenko said on a visit to the plant that his decree would become effective on Dec. 1. Even though he hasn't signed it yet, Borisovdrev workers who tried to quit this week were barred from doing so by the administration under various pretexts.

Lukashenko promised to raise an average worker's salary at the plant from the current $150 a month to $400-$500, roughly what it would be in Russia. He pledged to increase it further to $1,000 by 2015, but some of the workers were skeptical.

"My children want to eat now without waiting for 2015," said Nikolai Khmelevsky, 42, who currently earns about $200 a month at the Borisovdrev plant. "I have been

looking for another job, and now they will tie me here."

Managers at the Borisovdrev plant, a set of grim-looking Soviet-era buildings, refused to comment. The plant and other wood-processing plants are part of a concern that is 100 percent owned by the state, as are most Belarusian industries. The wood-processing plants export most of their output to Russia and Europe.

Nikolai Pokhabov, the leader of an independent union in Borisov, warned that Lukashenko's order could spark protests. "The government is trying to solve problems with a stick at the workers' expense," the union leader said. "But it fails to understand that threats and reliance on the stick will only push workers to flee the country or stage protests."

Alexander Klaskovsky, an independent Minsk-based analyst, said that Lukashenko may later try to expand the measure to other sectors of the economy. "Amid a severe economic crisis, Lukashenko is launching a risky experiment that could later be spread to the entire economy," Klaskovsky said. "It amounts to Lukashenko introducing elements of slavery in 21st century Europe."

About one million people in the nation of 10 million are estimated to be working abroad, most of them in neighboring Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania. One of the ironies of the situation is that Russia, which is seen as a prized destination by Belarusian workers, itself prevented its people from working abroad during Soviet times, through tight restrictions on exit visas.

A pariah in the West, Lukashenko also often has tense relations with Moscow, which

has been angered by his resistance to yielding control over Belarusian industries to Russian business. Lukashenko has kept most of the economy in state hands, but he is dependent on cheap energy and loans provided by Russia.

Last year, Belarus saw a sharp devaluation of its currency and inflation exceeding 100 percent after Lukashenko raised public sector wages in a populist move to ensure his re-election.

Lukashenko has managed to quell the public discontent thanks to new loans from Russia, but analysts warn that the country of 10 million may soon drift into a new crisis as it faces mounting foreign debt payments. Russia may not be eager to provide more aid or make it contingent on Lukashenko surrendering control over more economic assets.

"The Soviet-style economy has exhausted its resources and the Kremlin has become increasingly reluctant to issue loans," said Yaroslav Romanchuk, the head of Mises Research Center in Minsk. "Lukashenko has to invent abnormal motives in the absence of regular economic mechanisms."

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