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# Germany mirrors Europe's move to curb immigration

**A law set to take effect in January is aimed at luring skilled workers and restricting asylum seekers.**

**By Andreas Tzortzis** | *Special to The Christian Science Monitor*

**BERLIN, GERMANY** – For the past four years, Cameroonian Tita Koyima Denis's weeks have repeated themselves, as he puts it, "like a photocopy": nights on a hard mattress in a cramped apartment of a home for asylum seekers; days spent either watching TV, listening to the radio, or trying to set up a network of Cameroonian political activists living in exile.

Stranded in an immigrant's limbo while German officials review his application for political asylum, Mr. Denis receives a monthly allowance of 198 euros (\$195) from the German government, but he is not allowed to work or enroll in studies.

Denis says the frustration of inactivity has now become compounded by his fears that he will be deported and face reprisal in Cameroon once Germany's first-ever immigration law takes effect in January.

## **Wanted: qualified workers**

The new law's primary focus is to draw highly skilled workers to Germany, where about 750,000 jobs stand empty, and provide public money for language programs that would better integrate the roughly 7 million foreigners already here. Like other countries in Europe, Germany is faced with an aging population, a birth rate among the lowest on the Continent, and an

economy in need of qualified workers.

An uneasy Europe swings right

But the law includes measures that reflect the harder line Europe is taking on immigrants. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder's coalition government is cracking down on those determined to have no legitimate claim to asylum. A category affecting about 250,000 immigrants, now considered "tolerated" by Germany, will be dissolved. The category includes those without valid papers, those claiming to be too ill to return home, and those repeatedly appealing a rejected asylum application.

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Supporters say the new law will ferret out fraud and streamline rules on asylum seekers. But asylum advocates fear that thousands of legitimate refugees could be deported. And some migration experts say a more daunting process will scare off legitimate political refugees and spur the very illegal immigration Germany and other countries in Europe are trying to stop. "Now that it's become harder for people to apply for asylum ... the reliance on illegal channels is increasing," says Charlotte Altenhoener of the European Council of Refugees and Exiles.

An estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people arrive illegally in Western Europe every year, according to EU statistics. Legal asylum applicants, on the other hand, number some 380,000, a number that has been steadily declining since the Bosnian war sent thousands of refugees flooding into Western Europe in the early 1990s.

In Germany, more than 88,000 people applied for political asylum in 2001, according to German government statistics – the highest number in the European Union.

The most vocal critics of the new law are the opposition Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU). They say it's too liberal. "After a short time, when they're allowed to work and bring their family here, you'll see an increase," in asylum seekers, says Erwin Marschewski, the CDU's point man on immigration issues.

Objecting to voting procedures under which the immigration bill passed the upper house of parliament in March, the CDU and CSU are finalizing an injunction they plan to file against the new law in Germany's highest court. Conservative Bavarian leader and candidate for chancellor Edmund Stoiber has promised to scrap the new law and propose an alternative if he wins federal elections in September.

## **A longstanding quandary**

That would be a big step backward, says Klaus J. Bade, director of the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies at Osnabrueck University. The law goes far in addressing a 20-year-old problems he says, referring to Germany's long quandary over

how to handle its "guest workers" from Turkey, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia who came to build up Germany in the 1960s and 1970s. The government expected the workers to go home after a few years and never tried to integrate them when they decided to stay. Feeling inundated by immigrants, Germany passed a law that stopped the guest-worker program and imposed tighter restrictions on immigration. But it was often too rigid, says Mr. Bade, and thwarted later efforts to promote immigration in certain areas, such as the 1999 Green Card plan to lure computer experts to bolster the lagging information-technology sector. "With the new law, everything will become easier and more transparent," Bade says.

But Denis, who has been rejected for asylum once and is appealing, has another view: "If they deport me, then it's the end of my life." He has taken part in protests against the new law and is active in a lobby for political refugees. "Germany should take responsibility as a civilized country," he says.