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Business

Australian fruit farmers face harvest headache amid rising labor shortage

Many seasonal workers shut out of the country to halt spread of pandemic

NASHDALE, Australia: In near-perfect conditions, thanks to abundant rain and healthy trees, Australian fruit grower Michael Cunial's cherry orchard looks set to yield a bumper crop. He has just one problem: the harvest. Like many farmers in Australia, during harvests he relies on seasonal workers, many of whom have been shut out of the country since its international borders closed in March 2020 to halt the spread of the coronavirus pandemic.

Even if he can find workers for the cherry harvest, he may have to pay them more than he has in previous years. In common with most Australian fruit growers, Cunial has paid seasonal workers for what they can pick. But the system has left many workers earning less than the minimum wage, so the rules may be about to change.

"The system of a piece rate tends to make sense," the fruit grower said at his 50-hectare (120-acre) farm, Curinya Orchards, in Nashdale-about four hours' drive from Sydney. "If you want to have a go, you can actually make really good money. And if you're hopeless, you don't."

Cunial said he expects "really big" cherries this year, which will probably be ready for harvest in early- to mid-December. He hires about 50 seasonal workers for the annual harvest and pays them piece rate. But the system has been condemned by the Fair Work Commission, Australia's industrial relations tribunal.

Below minimum wage

Ruling on a complaint by the Australian Workers Union, it said seasonal farm workers should get the minimum hourly wage of Aus$25.41 (US$18.50). "The totality of the evidence presents a picture of significant underpayment of pieceworkers in the horticulture industry when compared to the minimum award hourly rate," the commission found. Farming federations, which oppose the finding, have until November 26 to appeal. According to a 2018 study of more than 8,000 horticultural farms by the Fair Work Ombudsman, 56 percent of them underpaid a proportion of their workers.

Working hard is not always enough. Victor, a young Frenchman who preferred not to be identified by his full name to protect his employment prospects, had to work 88 days in farming to be allowed to stay a second year-a condition of the working holiday visa. "I have worked in the vineyards. I had to wrap the branches around wire. We were paid 11 cents a branch. I was among the top 10 percent and I still only got Aus$9 an hour, less than half the minimum wage," he said.

Cedric Gestin, another French worker who is in his third year in Australia, says he has always preferred farms that pay by the hour. After three years working full-time in Cunial's cherry orchard, Remy Genet manages the seasonal workers. "I have got guys who can fill 60 lugs (fruit crates), earn Aus$700 in a day, and others who can only fill nine lugs in the same field. The difference is the motivation," he said.

"Of course, there are farms where even the good ones never earn enough money because there is not enough fruit or the farm is badly run. But where some people can make money, everyone can make money."

NASHDALE, Australia: A worker inspecting cherries at a cherry farm located in the rural New South Wales state town of Nashdale, some 212 km from Sydney. — AFP

'Keep an eye on them'

Cunial says he is concerned about the prospect of laying off workers who do not pick enough if there is a switch to hourly pay. "We are going to have to keep an eye on them. And within maybe half a day, we're going to have to let people go if this decision comes to fruition," he said.

"Cherries have got a window of about five days to a week, if you're lucky, before you need to get them off a tree. So if you don't have the pickers, they could just end up going bad on the tree." Cunial has another challenge: he is finding it hard to recruit since the borders closed. The number of young people in Australia on working holiday visas dropped from nearly 120,000 in December 2019 to 39,000 in 2020. The labor shortage is coinciding with an expected record farming production, forecast to be worth Aus$73 billion across all crops in the 2021-2022 season-up seven percent from the previous year. — AFP

CBK launches fourth round of 'Certified Shariah Auditor' certificate program

KUWAIT: In an effort to enhance the governance of Shariah supervision in the Islamic banks in Kuwait, and reinforce Shariah auditing in such banks, the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) launched the fourth round of the Certified Shariah Auditor Certificate Program within the Kafaa Initiative. The Kafaa Initiative was launched by the CBK in collaboration with Kuwaiti banks and is managed by the Institute of Banking Studies (IBS).

This came in a statement in which Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel, governor of the Central Bank of Kuwait and chairman of the board of directors of the Institute of Banking Studies, stated the importance of this program aimed at strengthening Shariah auditing in the Islamic Shariah -compliant financial institutions, as auditing is considered one of the basics of Shari'ah governance, particularly in

Dr Mohammad Y Al-Hashel

light of the changes in the Islamic banking sector and the banking industry in general.

Dr Al-Hashel added, the program was launched to meet the need for more qualified resources in the field of Shariah audit. He also mentioned the great demand witnessed in the past sessions of this program, from which 100 Certified Shariah Auditors graduated, after passing all the requirements to obtain this certificate, which has become mandatory for practicing Shariah audit work on CBK- and Capital Markets Authority (CMA)-regulated Islamic banking and financial entities.

The governor added that developing technical and professional qualified cadres in all aspects of financial, economic and banking business in the State of Kuwait, including Islamic Shariah-compliant financial and banking services, is a strategic direction of the CBK, CMA and Centre for Islamic Economic (CIE). Therefore, CBK is keen to support the banking and financial sector in Kuwait, with highly trained and qualified cadres in the areas necessary for the banking system's work, and develop human capital capable of pushing the banking industry in Kuwait to further development and leadership.

On December 20, 2016, the CBK issued instructions regarding "Shariah Supervisory Governance in in Kuwaiti Islamic Banks", including a set of elements regulating the governance of Shariah supervision, and the general requirements of the governance of Shariah supervision, its principles, the roles of the board of directors, the executive management and the Shariah Supervisory Board, the internal and external Shariah audit, the scope and objectives of the Shariah audit as well as the required conditions and qualifications. Passing the certificate of the Certified Shariah Auditor is one of the mandatory requirements for the entities subject to the supervision of the CBK and CMA, which are compatible with Islamic Shariah .

The governor concluded his statement by referring to the most prominent features of this certificate, which focus on the aspects of knowledge of the Islamic financial industry, as well as on the practical and applied aspects in the field of Shariah audit, according to best practices and the latest scientific materials in this regard. The Shariah Auditor Certificate is certified by the CBK, CMA, and CIE.

COLOMBO: A Sri Lanka's main opposition activist wearing a mask of Sri Lanka's President Gotabaya Rajapaksa takes part with others in a demonstration to denounce the shortage of cooking gas, sugar, kerosene oil and a few other commodities as the country faces a major foreign exchange crisis, in Colombo. —AFP

Sri Lanka ends farm chemical ban as organic drive fails

COLOMBO: Sri Lanka abandoned its quest to become the world's first completely organic farming nation yesterday, announcing it would immediately lift an import ban on pesticides and other agricultural inputs. The island country has been in the grips of a severe economic crisis, with a lack of foreign exchange triggering shortages of food, crude oil and other essential goods.

Authorities had already walked back restrictions on fertilizer imports last month for tea, the country's main export earner. But ahead of planned farmer protests in the capital, Sri Lanka's agricultural ministry said it would end a broader ban on all agrochemicals including herbicides and pesticides.

"We will now allow chemical inputs that are urgently needed," ministry secretary Udith Jayasinghe told the private News First TV network. "Considering the need to ensure food security, we have taken this decision." Vast tracts of farmland were abandoned after the import ban, first introduced in May.

Shortages have worsened in the past week, with prices for rice, vegetables and other market staples having doubled across Sri Lanka. Supermarkets have also rationed rice sales, allowing only five kilograms (11 pounds) per customer.

Farmers' organizations had planned to march on the national parliament in Colombo on Friday to demand the import of essential chemicals to protect their crops. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa had justified the import ban by saying he wanted to make Sri Lankan farming 100 percent organic.

The policy was introduced after a massive hit to the cash-strapped island's economy in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with tourism earnings and foreign worker remittances drastically falling.

Authorities attempted to save foreign exchange by last year banning a host of imported goods, including some food and spices. Sri Lanka also shut its only oil refinery last month after running out of dollars to import crude. — AFP

Billionaire Sawiris wants 'level playing field' for Egypt business

EL-GOUNA, Egypt: Naguib Sawiris-one of Africa's richest men, with an estimated fortune of over $3 billion-has warned that the Egyptian government's involvement in the private sector makes for an unfair playing field. "Companies that are government-owned or with the military don't pay taxes or customs," Sawiris told AFP from a luxury hotel in the Red Sea resort town of El-Gouna, which his family founded. "We of course can't do that, so the competition from the beginning is unfair." "The state has to be a regulator, not an owner" of economic activity, said the outspoken 67-year-old, Egypt's second-richest man after his own brother, Nassef.

Since President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi took power in 2014, the former army general has embarked on massive national infrastructure projects, with a new capital in the desert as the centerpiece of his urban vision. The military's economic reach has grown under his leadership, partnering up with firms such as the Sawiris family's Orascom. The army has played a key though opaque role in Egypt's economy for decades, producing everything from washing machines to pasta as well as building roads and operating gas stations.

No official figures are published about its financial interests. Egypt's economy "has been given a push lately because of government spending on infrastructure, such as new highways and the new capital... and the private sector is building these projects," Sawiris said.

But "you can't depend on the state forever" to sustain the national economy, the magnate warned. "There's still competition from the government, so foreign investors are a bit scared off. I myself don't even bid when I see government firms (in the race) because it's not a level playing field."

'Hope after the revolution'

A scion of Egypt's wealthiest family, Sawiris built his fortune in telecommunications by investing in mobile networks in countries such as Bangladesh, Iraq and Pakistan. Orascom has the only operating telecoms license in North Korea, building the regime's sole mobile network Koryolink.

Gambling on freedoms that emerged after Egypt's 2011 revolution that overthrew long-time autocrat Hosni Mubarak, Sawiris founded the liberal Free Egyptians party. "We had hope in the youth after the January 25 revolution, but they said they weren't interested in forming a political party. They were more interested in toppling the regime-and then what?" he said.

"It'll only come back, and that's what happened." Sisi has been criticized over his heavy-handed rule, with human rights organizations decrying a crackdown on dissent. Sawiris was coy about commenting on the current political scene. "You have a parliament at least. I don't want to say too much here," the tycoon said with a wry smile. His party failed to win a single seat in the latest legislature, stacked with Sisi loyalists. "No true revolutionary who cares about the lives of people and wants to truly solve their daily problems ever wins," he lamented.

CAIRO, Egypt: In this file photo, Egyptian tycoon and El-Gouna Film Festival co-founder Naguib Sawiris speaks during a press conference in Cairo. —AFP

'Sense of creation'

An avid Twitter user with over 7.5 million followers and a penchant for controversy, Sawiris says he has started to slow down. But the cinema-lover, who co-founded Egypt's El Gouna Film Festival five years ago, still has a keen eye for business opportunities. "I like real estate because there's a sense of creation. "When you first go to a barren site and then later you see a new building and it looks good-like here in Gouna-you're seeing something in real life that was born out of a desert." His business acumen served him well in 2008 during the global financial crisis, when he invested in gold and gold-mining in West Africa and Australia. — AFP