

# Labor-short Japan more at home with automation than U.S.

By Yuri Kageyama  
AP Business Writer

**M**ORIYA, Japan — Thousands upon thousands of cans are filled with beer, capped and washed, wrapped into six-packs, and boxed at dizzying speeds — 1,500 per minute, to be exact — on humming conveyor belts that zip and wind in a sprawling factory near Tokyo.

Nary a soul is in sight in this picture-perfect image of Japanese automation.

The machines do all the heavy lifting at this plant run by Asahi Breweries, Japan's top brewer. The human job is to make sure the machines do the work right, and to check on the quality the sensors are monitoring.

"Basically, nothing goes wrong. The lines are up and running 96 percent," said Shinichi Uno, a manager at the plant. "Although machines make things, human beings oversee the machines."

The debate over machines snatching jobs from people is muted in Japan, where birth rates have been sinking for decades, raising fears of a labor shortage. It would be hard to find a culture that celebrates robots more, evident in the popularity of companion robots for consumers sold by internet company SoftBank and Toyota Motor Corp, among others.

Japan, which forged a big push toward robotics starting in the 1990s, leads the world in robots per 10,000 workers in the automobile sector — 1,562, compared with 1,091 in the U.S. and 1,133 in Germany, according to a White House report submitted to congress last year. Japan was also ahead in sectors outside automobiles at 219 robots per 10,000 workers, compared with 76 for the U.S. and 147 for Germany.

One factor in Japan's different take on automation is the "lifetime employment" system. Major Japanese companies generally retain workers, even if their abilities become outdated, and retrain them for other tasks, said Koichi Iwamoto, a senior fellow at the Research Institute of Economy, Trade, and Industry.



**PARTITION MUSEUM.** A worker sorts through photographs, newspaper clippings, and other material that now cover the walls at a new museum on the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, which opened in August in Amritsar, India, 20 miles from the border with Pakistan. India's first Partition museum tells the stories of those who survived the chaos and bloodshed seven decades ago. (AP Photo/Rishabh R. Jain)

## India opens first Partition museum 70 years after bloody event

By Rishabh R. Jain  
The Associated Press

**A**MRITSAR, India — In the 70 years since India and Pakistan were created from the former British Empire, there has never been a venue focused on the stories and memorabilia of those who survived the chaotic and bloody chapter in history — until now.

A new museum on the Partition of the Indian subcontinent opened in August, as the two South Asian giants marked seven decades as independent nations.

The exhibitions are housed in the red-brick Town Hall building in the north Indian border city of Amritsar. They include photographs, newspaper clippings, and donated personal items meant to tell the story of how the region's struggle for freedom from colonial rule turned into one of its most violent episodes.

*The staff at  
The Asian Reporter  
wish you and your  
family a happy and  
safe Labor Day!*



**1,500 CANS PER MINUTE.** An Asahi Breweries employee works on the production line at a factory in Moriya, near Tokyo. Japan is ahead of the U.S. and Europe in introducing robots to the workplace, but that has not resulted in the job reductions in routine mid-level employment observed in other nations. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

That kind of resistance to adopting digital technology for services also is reflected in how Japanese society has so far opted to keep taxis instead of shifting to online ride-hailing and shuttle services.

Still, automation has progressed in Japan to the extent the nation has now entered what Iwamoto called a "reflective stage," in which "human harmony with machines" is being pursued, he said.

"Some tasks may be better performed by people, after all," Iwamoto said.

Kiyoshi Sakai, who has worked at Asahi for 29 years, recalls how, in the past, can caps had to be placed into machines by hand, a repetitive task that was hard not just on the body, but also the mind.

And so he is grateful for automation's helping hand. Machines at the plant have become more than 50 percent smaller over the years. They are faster and more precise than three decades ago.

Gone are the days things used to go wrong all the time and human intervention was needed to get machines running properly again. Every 10 to 15 minutes, people used to have to go check on the products; there were no sensors back then.

Glitches are so few these days there is barely any reason to work up a sweat, he added with a smile.

Like many workers in Japan, Sakai doesn't seem worried about his job disappearing. As the need for plant workers nose-dived with the advance of automation, he was promoted to the general affairs section, a common administrative department at Japanese companies.

"I remember the work being so hard. But when I think back, and it was all about delivering great beer to everyone, it makes me so proud," said Sakai, who drinks beer every day.

"I have no regrets. This is a stable job."

That system is starting to fray as Japan globalizes, but it's still largely in use, Iwamoto said.

Although data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show digitalization reduces demand for mid-level routine tasks — such as running assembly lines — while boosting demand for low- and high-skilled jobs, that trend has been less pronounced in Japan than in the U.S.

The OECD data, which studied shifts from 2002 to 2014, showed employment trends remained almost unchanged for Japan.

That means companies in Japan weren't resorting as aggressively as those in the U.S. to robots to replace humans. Clerical workers, for instance, were keeping their jobs, although their jobs could be done better, in theory, by computers.

## Palm oil is killing orangutans in Indonesia peat swamp

By Binsar Bakkara  
The Associated Press

**T**RIPA PEAT SWAMP, Indonesia — It's been called the orangutan capital of the world, but the great apes in Indonesia's Tripa peat forest on the island of Sumatra are under threat by palm-oil plantations that have gobbled up thousands of acres of land to make room for trees that produce the most consumed vegetable oil on the planet.

Palm oil is found in everything from cookies and lipstick to paint, shampoo, and instant noodles, and Indonesia is the world's top producer. As demand soars, plantations are expanding. In Tripa, companies drain the swamp, releasing planet-warming carbon into the atmosphere, and clear the forest of its native trees, often setting illegal fires.

This robs orangutans and other endangered species of their habitats, leaving the animals marooned on small swaths of forest, boxed-in on all sides by plantations. They slowly starve because there is no longer enough food to sustain them or they are frequently killed by plantation workers when they emerge from the jungle in search of food. Mothers often die protecting their babies, which are taken and sold as illegal pets.

On August 10, a rescue team from the Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Program, accompanied by Indonesia's nature conservation agency, hiked into the Tripa peatlands to look for a mother and baby orangutan that had been reported in an area being overtaken by oil palms. The plan was to sedate and relocate them, but when the team arrived, there was no sign of the duo. Instead, they encountered a 110-pound male orangutan that was about 20 years old. He too was



**HABITAT DESTRUCTION.** Conservationists with the Sumatran Orangutan Conservation Program prepare a makeshift stretcher to carry a tranquilized male orangutan in Aceh province, Indonesia. The 110-pound orangutan was relocated from a swath of destroyed forest in Tripa peat swamp that is located too close to a palm-oil plantation. (AP Photo/Binsar Bakkara)

suffering, and the team managed to tranquilize him and carry him out of the jungle in a stretcher net.

He was named "Black" and driven about eight hours to an orangutan reintroduction center in Jantho, Aceh Besar. He joined about 100 other primates that have been released in the jungle to establish a new wild population. Only an estimated 6,600 critically endangered Sumatran orangutans remain. Less than 200 are believed to be living in the Tripa swamp, but it is still one of the densest concentrations of orangutans. The great apes are only found on two islands, Sumatra and Borneo, which Indonesia shares with Malaysia. Both support separate species.

"Capturing wild orangutans is not something we like to do. It is difficult, highly stressful, and risky for all concerned," said the rescue group's director, Ian Singleton, who has been studying Sumatran orangutans since the 1990s. "It really is a last resort, and a reflection of the dire situation

many of these animals are in as a result of the ongoing destruction of their habitat."

The Tripa peat swamp is part of the 6.4-million-acre Leuser Ecosystem in northern Sumatra, which is the last place on earth where orangutans, tigers, elephants, and rhinos live together in the wild. The entire area is also under threat from logging, pulp, and paper plantations and mining. In 2012, huge fires that were intentionally set to clear the land for palm oil ripped through the swamp, killing wildlife and blanketing surrounding areas in a thick haze.

The Indonesian government filed a lawsuit against palm oil firm P.T. Kallista Alam in 2012 for illegally burning 2,470 acres of the Tripa swamp. Three years later, it was ordered to pay \$26 million in fines and reparation. A manager was sentenced to three years in prison. However, the company filed a lawsuit against the government in July and so far no fines have been paid and no prison time has been served.