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Ala. governor reassures foreign industries

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Alabama's governor said Monday he is worried the state's tough crackdown on illegal immigration law could hurt the recruitment of foreign industries, so he's reaching out to foreign executives to let them know that the state welcomes them.

"We are not anti-foreign companies. We are very pro-foreign companies," Bentley told reporters at the Capitol.

The Republican governor and other supporters of the law have described it as the nation's toughest. Some parts of it were put on hold by the federal courts, but major provisions took effect in late September, including allowing police to detain motorists who can't produce a valid driver's license. Since then, two foreign workers with the Mercedes-Benz and Honda auto assembly plants in Alabama have run into problems.

On Nov. 16, a German manager with Mercedes-Benz was arrested under the law in Tuscaloosa for not having a driver's license with him while driving a rental car. The charge was dismissed after the man provided documents in municipal court. Bentley said he learned about the arrest in a call from someone with Mercedes, but he did not say whom.

Last week, a Honda employee from Japan was detained under the law in Leeds. Police at a roadblock found him carrying an international driver's license and passport, but not an Alabama license or Japanese license as required by the law. Leeds police said they released the man under the immigration law at a magistrate's recommendation, and a city judge dismissed a charge of driving without a license.

Before the auto workers' problems, in early November, Bentley told a Birmingham business audience that the law had not hurt Alabama's image with industrial prospects. But Bentley now says the two arrests involving foreign auto workers "theoretically" could hurt Alabama's ability to recruit foreign industries.

"Obviously people worry about that. I worry about that. I want our image to be very positive because we are open for business in Alabama," he said.

Bentley's job as governor includes leading industrial recruitment efforts, and he said he is calling foreign executives as reassurance about the law. Bentley said he has talked with officials at companies including Mercedes and Golden Dragon, a Chinese company that has announced — but not yet built — a copper tubing plant in Thomasville. The governor said he's assured them that Alabama will work through any problems with the immigration law.

"People need to just calm down. Everything is going to be OK," he said.

An opponent of the law, Democratic state Sen. Hank Sanders of Selma, sent the governor a letter

Monday urging him to support a repeal of the law when the next legislative session starts Feb. 7. Sanders said the law has resurrected ugly images from the civil rights era 50 years ago and "has become a worldwide symbol of what's wrong with Alabama."

Bentley said Monday he will work with the Legislature to make the law simpler and easier to understand. But he said, "It will not be repealed. If you live and work in this state, you must be legal."

Two Republican legislative leaders, Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh of Anniston and House Speaker Mike Hubbard of Auburn, issued a joint statement saying the Legislature will consider minor changes. But they said, "We will not repeal or weaken the law, acquiescing to liberal elites' and news media's efforts to intimidate and shame Alabama."

Bentley, who served in the Legislature for eight years, said any complex law passed by the Legislature usually requires some modification and clarification once officials start implementing it, and the immigration law is no exception. He said he is working with the Legislature and the attorney general on that, as well as looking for administrative solutions.

He cited a new state computer program that allows county tag officials to verify the authenticity of a driver's license when a motorist seeks to renew it. There's also a new online program that lets people sign up to apply for farm jobs that were abandoned by foreign workers once the law took effect.

Bentley said he's also working on getting other countries to agree to a reciprocal agreement such as the one Germany and Alabama have. A German worker with a valid driver's license from that country can get an Alabama license and vice versa.

Read more: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505245_162-57337008/ala-governor-reassures-foreign-industries/