

Filipino Reporter

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CROSSCURRENTS

Open letter to Mr. Ramos



By REUBEN SEGURITAN

Your meeting with Filipino Americans at the Jacob Javits Convention Center was most appreciated. You made us proud and highly optimistic of our beloved country with your message of hope. No doubt you have eased many of our natural anxieties given the conditions plaguing our country.

There are a number of issues, however, left unaddressed yet were basic, including commitments made in your election campaign. Because they were not mentioned by any of the six community presenters, it could have given you the impression that these issues are unimportant to us. But they are, for the consequences of your decision on these matters shall determine the role we, overseas Filipinos, shall play as partners in your program for nation building.

I am taking this opportunity herewith to raise these issues for the record:

1. Overseas Voting Rights: Article V Sec. 2 of the Philippine Constitution provides for absentee voting by Filipinos abroad. Bills related to this issue have been introduced, among them HB #4058, HB #6507, and Senate Bill #78. All these bills sought to give overseas Filipinos the right to vote during elections. House of Representatives Resolution #7 also sought to amend Article V, Sec 1 of the Constitution to exclude non-resident Filipino citizens from the residency requirement so they can vote. The concern that no viable procedure has yet been instituted to protect the sanctity of the ballot abroad should have long been resolved. Given the general economic standing of Filipinos

overseas, they are less likely to be bought and thus render fears of votebuying and fraud rather flimsy. Absentee voting is a constitutional right, not a mere statutory right that can be withdrawn by Congress at will.

2. Sectoral Representation: Up to this time, we have yet to see in the House of Representatives a member representing overseas Filipinos despite a constitutional provision, Article VI Sec 5(2), that addressed the issue. Executive Order 198 issued in 1987 implemented the provision but failed to recognize overseas Filipinos.

Filipino contract workers abroad are acknowledged as among the top dollar earners for the country. They remit billions of dollars and help the economy stay afloat. Their contributions to the Philippine economy should at least be compensated with adequate representation in Congress. Senate Bill #142 introduced by Senator Alvarez, later substituted by SB #856, which proposed the right of overseas Filipinos to be represented in the lower House, was never acted upon.

3. Dual Citizenship: Under this right which was promised during your election campaign, natural born Filipinos who have lost their citizenship by virtue of naturalization in a foreign country may be repatriated and their Philippine citizenship restored without need for judicial proceedings. So far, there has been little movement too on this issue.

4. Economic Rights and Privileges of natural-born Filipinos based abroad: Senate Bill #1106 seeks to allow natural born citizens of the Philippines who have lost their citizenship to retain certain rights and privileges reserved for Filipino citizens, among them the practice of certain professions and engaging in certain businesses. As has been pointed out in the bill's explanatory note, the prevailing economic conditions (then and now) have forced many natural born citizens of the Philippines to migrate to other countries. But though they have become citizens of their adopted

countries, they remain interested in contributing to the development of the country. They are, however, hindered by restrictions particularly in the field of investments while a majority of the investment areas are reserved only to Filipino citizens. Overseas Filipinos have not forgotten their roots and many of them are either thinking of investing in their motherland now or look forward to a future where they may transfer their equities to the homeland when they retire. This bill is severely limited in scope as it does not address equally vital issues as ownership of land and double taxation, and yet it remains unresolved to this day.

In addition to these, we would like to hear of your position on the issues of World War II Veterans and the Amerasians. Do you at all intend to take them up with President Bill Clinton?

5. Veterans Benefits: Our veterans have been deprived of full material benefits due every veteran who had served in the US Armed Forces during World War II. The Rescission Act of 1946 specifically excluded them from these benefits by declaring that the service which they rendered "are deemed not 'active service' for the purpose of any law of the US conferring rights, privileges or benefits." Senator Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii) pointed out that this is the only instance in this century when the US Congress drew a distinction between veterans with regard to entitlements on the basis of how, where, or why they served in the US Armed Forces, and this discriminatory treatment was reserved for Filipino veterans.

Also, the recently passed US naturalization laws on veterans contain provisions that negate the intended effect. Military records kept in the Philippine Veterans Affairs office in the Philippines even if duly authenticated are not acceptable as evidence of military service. As a result, a great percentage of veteran applicants have been unable to prove their military service since their records in St. Louis, Missouri are missing. Records that are kept there are the only evidence deemed

acceptable. Also, children of veterans are excluded from naturalization benefits and have thus to wait for as long as ten years to join their parents. Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi has filed a bill in the US Congress to correct these while Senator Inouye of Hawaii and Congressmen Gilman and Blackwell filed other bills to provide that persons considered to be Commonwealth Army veterans by reason of service with the Armed Forces during World War II in the Philippines shall be eligible for full veterans' benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

6. Finally, I wish to address the issue of Amerasians in the Philippines. The present law allows children of American citizens from Thailand, Korea, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to migrate to the United States. Despite prolonged US military presence in the country that began at the turn of the century, and on up to July 1992, Filipino Amerasians were excluded from this list "because it (the Philippines) was not a war zone from 1960 to 1982."

Rep. Lucien Blackwell (D-PA) and thirty-three others sponsored HR 2429 that would grant US citizenship to Filipino children fathered by American servicemen who once serve in US military bases in the Philippines. The fact that the country was not a war zone at a particular period does not change the indubitable reality that these 30,000 children were fathered by American servicemen who have abandoned their responsibility to these children, now living in poverty and are facing identity crisis.

These measures remain under consideration and it might help a great deal if your dialogue with the US president shall include them. We realize commitment may not be forthcoming too soon because of the economic implication, but in the name of fairness and justice, it is worth the effort to discuss them.

These are some of the priorities that need to be dealt with now. They are pressing concerns which, if not addressed immediately may fizzle out and turn cold, their urgency lost from neglect and inability to confront them at a time when it counts most.

Maraming Salamat po at Mabuhay kayo at ang Pilipinas.