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Migrant Workers: Heroes or Victims?

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The recent plan of US President George W. Bush to ease immigration policy toward illegal workers has sparked renewed interest on the presence of undocumented migrant workers who have taken job opportunities that have generally been ignored by many Americans.

It is not always the case that Filipinos who come to the US to work end up with professional jobs in the healthcare, computer or other professional sectors. There are many Filipinos who come to the US to seek better employment opportunities and take on unskilled level jobs, notwithstanding the fact that they have college degrees or significant professional experience in the Philippines. These Filipinos realize that they earn more working on lower level jobs in the US than they would if they kept their professional jobs back home.

An estimated 2,500 Filipinos leave the country every day to seek employment abroad due to the continuing economic crisis in the Philippines, according to Ibon Foundation, Inc., a research development institution in the Philippines.

Ibon Foundation reports that the global economic recession did not affect the increased deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW). In its report, Ibon Foundation cited figures from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration indicating that 602,679 OFWs were deployed in 2000 and in the following year 615,697 left the Philippines. Most of the OFWs are land-based and deployed in countries in the Middle East and Asia, with a significant number ending up in Europe and in recent years, North America.

Migrant workers as modern-day heroes

Filipino migrant workers are hailed in their homeland as its modern-day heroes. For the last two decades, Filipinos trooped to far and distant lands to literally make a living for their family back home. Not only have they been able to send money to put food on the table, they've been able to buy small but decent homes and send their children to school. Being able to provide for these basic needs seem to be worth the pain of separation from family or isolation in a foreign land for years, particularly for a growing number of Filipino women who work as domestic helpers.

Ibon Foundation also cites a study conducted by the Philippine Association of Service Exporters, Inc, (PASEI) on OFW deployment from 1999 to 2001. The PASEI report suggests that the actual figures on the deployment of OFWs do not show that a majority of them find jobs in the fields of medicine, information technology or so called "professional high value" jobs. The PASEI report cited that more than half of all deployments between 1999 and 2001 were comprised of domestic helpers and entertainers.

Unlike their counterparts in Hongkong, Singapore, Malaysia or in Middle East countries, most of the Filipino domestics in the US are not deployed from the Philippines specifically to fulfill a contract as a domestic worker. They usually come either as tourists or as

domestic help of diplomatic officials, officers of international organizations or business professionals. The tourists tend to overstay and somehow manage to get employment in a household. The domestic workers of diplomatic officials, officers of international organizations and business professionals, on the other hand, come on special visas procured for them by their employers.

There are those who come as nursing trainees, but fail to qualify for placement in a hospital or medical institution. Instead of returning home, they find jobs in the US as nannies, elderly companions or housekeepers. There are also an undetermined number of women, who are victims of human smuggling and have ended up as domestic workers. These cases have a common denominator, their undocumented status as migrant workers renders them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Vulnerability to abuse

To be sure, the push factor at home has contributed to the vulnerability of Filipino domestic workers abroad. In the first place, domestic workers would rather suffer in silence and be able to send what little earnings they have to the Philippines instead of barely making ends meet while back home. Massive unemployment and an economy in tatters leave little or no hope for most Filipinos who aspire to a better quality of life for their family.

Over the last two decades, the Philippines has been dependent on the remittances of OFWs who are considered the country's top dollar earners. This dependence has been institutionalized by economic policies that focus on sending out more OFWs and prioritize measures that facilitate the flow of their dollar remittances. As a consequence, the Philippine economy has not yet diversified nor has it developed other means of generating income. Today, the Philippine government continues to pursue in earnest a labor export policy that has made it less effective in protecting the rights of Filipino domestic workers abroad.

OFW advocacy groups like Migrante-International have demanded that the Philippine government work harder at protecting its migrant workers by forging bilateral agreements with countries using Philippine labor. This strategy, however, is severely restricted by the fact that the Philippine government can bring to the negotiating table little clout or financial influence vis-à-vis receiving countries who are stronger politically and economically.

Philippine Government Dilemma

Confronted with the dilemma between protecting migrant domestic workers and antagonizing the host countries, the Philippine government attempted to bring the migrant workers' rights issue before the court of international public opinion. In an issue of *Signposts to Asia & the Pacific*, author Andrew McKenzie cited the Philippines' effort to seek an international resolution through the United Nations for the protection of rights of all migrant workers and their families. However, it seems most countries are reluctant to give labor-sending countries a greater say in the terms given their workers.

To date, the Philippines is one of 33 countries that have adopted the UN Convention on the Protection of Migrant Workers and their Families, which was sponsored by Mexico. The Philippines is also a signatory to the UN Resolution on the Protection of Migrants, Especially Women and Children. Thirty other countries signed this UN Resolution also sponsored by Mexico.

Domestic worker abuse, in the meantime, continues unabated. Some cases come up the surface and have been given enough public attention to qualify it as a legitimate social issue. But domestic worker advocacy groups insist there are more unreported instances of exploitation and abuse. Something has to be done to end, if not reduce, the abuse of domestic migrant workers.

One step in this direction is the effort to disseminate information on the basic rights and entitlements of domestic migrant workers. More often than not, these workers believe they have no legal basis for insisting on fair compensation, or better working conditions. Worse, they keep mum about physical or sexual abuse because of the mistaken notion that any brush with the authorities will jeopardize their continued stay in the US, and consequently their livelihood.

The Bush proposal to liberalize the rules on migrant workers opens, albeit tentatively, a window of opportunity for many undocumented workers in the US. Hopefully, the legalization of undocumented workers will minimize abuse and exploitation by employers. With the openness to be brought about by the proposed immigration reform, migrant workers will feel motivated in asserting their rights and be more conscientious with their responsibilities, thereby creating a safe, orderly and productive work situation.

Despite this favorable development here in the US, however, the Philippine government must re-examine its policy of labor export and look at ways of mending the economy so that life in the Philippines shouldn't be so bad that it would drive its own people away.