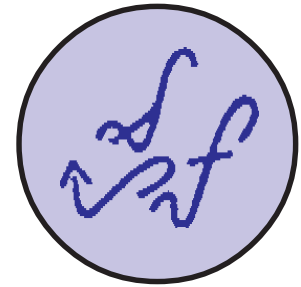


News Digest

August
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APMM

Monthly Newsletter of the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM)

Among overseas Filipino workers, the appreciation of the Philippine peso is not a cause for celebration. Instead, it has been a source of frustration and much worries for the survival of their families.

“Strong” peso weakens Filipino migrant workers

PHILIPPINE Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, since the turn of the year, has hyped on the supposed improvement of the economy. Increasing gross domestic product (GDP), flows of investments, fiscal improvements and strengthening of the Philippines peso are some of the more popular statements that GMA has used up to the latest State of the Nation Address (SONA).

Out of all the economic alphabets and mounds of statistics that allegedly support the claim of economic recovery, the appreciation of the Philippine peso has made Filipino migrant workers gravely concerned.

From an exchange rate of more than P56 per US\$1, it has plummeted down to around P45 to the dollar. The government grabs on to this development to propel back the rapidly dwindling confidence of the public to the GMA administration.

Respected research think-tank, Ibon Foundation, has belied the government's claim of the strengthening peso as an indication of an upsurge. Primarily, they said, the peso recovery is mainly due to the increased remittances from Filipinos overseas (almost US\$13-B in 2006) and the general weakening of the US currency in the

international market. It is not, they said, because of any increase in genuinely Philippine-made exports.

Numbers aside, what matters in the end is how the ordinary people, especially the OFWs, view such happenings. This “peso appreciation” has led to a rapid reduction in the equivalence of OFW remittances to their families.

Definitely, unlike the GMA government, OFWs are not overjoyed.

Soaring prices of basic commodities and services

Filipinos work abroad to meet, at the very least, the needs of their families. Under the GMA administration, it is getting more and more difficult to do so.

The unchanging basic economic situation of the country – that of high-dependency on imports, export of raw materials, and mounting foreign and domestic debts – has continuously skyrocketed prices of basic commodities. Prior to the “strengthening peso”, the Filipino people had to contend

with increase in prices that has been compounded by the impacts of new tax measures such as the reformed value added tax on ordinary consumers.

A survey conducted by Ibon Foundation in July 2007 reveals that, within the previous three months, people had difficulties meeting the following expenses: electricity and/or water (72.45%); medicines and/or medical treatment (71.24%); children's schooling (67.74%); food (67%); and transportation (65.32%).

These are substantially higher than those gathered in the same period last year, when 64% of respondents said they had trouble paying for their water and/or electricity; 62.47% said they had trouble paying for medicines and/or medical treatment; 66.7% said they did not have enough to buy food; 63.69% had trouble paying for their children's schooling and 59.65% had trouble meeting transportation costs.

Cuts to government social spending even aggravates the situation. Health and education are two of the major expenses that OFWs work for and these have been targets of budget reduction.

(GFMD, pls. go to p. 2)

Real spending per capita on education of P1,506 in 2006 is 22% lower than in 2001. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that out of every 100 children who enter Grade 1, only 66% will finish elementary school, 43% high school and only 14% will graduate from college. Instead of going to school, around 2.5 million children aged 5 to 17 are forced to work to augment family income or just for just plain survival.

State universities are forced to conduct more income generating scheme such as privatization of university facilities and hikes in tuition fees just so they can cope with the dwindling financial allocation from the government. Premiere state university, the University of the Philippines, has increased its fees by 300% that made it much inaccessible to students from lower-income families even with its “socialized tuition” scheme.

Meanwhile, real spending per capita on health was a measly P159 in 2006. This was 25% lower than in 2001.

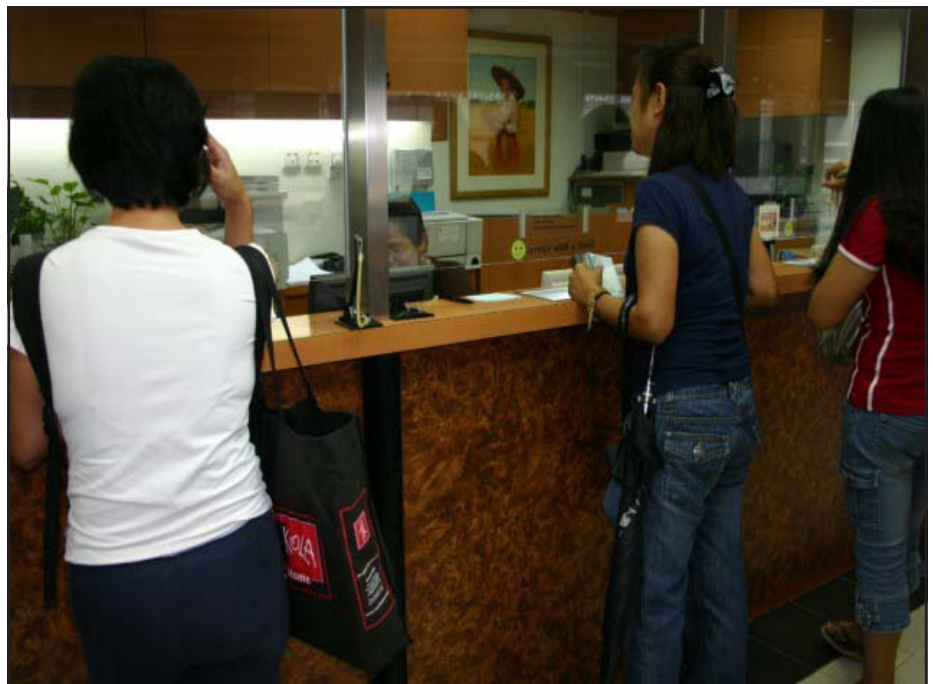
On the other hand, budget allocation for debt servicing has shot up during GMA's reign. Total debt service allocations in the national budget have increased 186% from P274 billion in 2001 to P784 billion in just the first eleven months of last year.

While the government keeps on track with the neoliberal globalization policies pushed by the World Trade Organization and other world powers, social services will continue to be subjected to privatization and fee increases that will further put it out of reach even of OFW families.

Attacks on the wage of migrant workers

In countries where they work, the wage of Filipino migrant workers, as all foreign workers, are attacked. Their salaries are either cut or are maintained at a low level for they are considered as cheap laborers. This further erodes the economic capacity of migrant workers to meet the needs of their families.

In Hong Kong, for example, wage of Filipino domestic helpers has not yet recovered from the HK\$590 wage cut the government implemented since 2000. The low wage is held hostage especially with the implementation of the levy for employers of foreign domestic workers that is actually an indirect taxation to foreign helpers.



Filipino migrant workers are “hurting” on the strengthening of the Philippine that has significantly reduced their remittances to their families while prices of commodities and services in the country soar even higher.

Migrant workers in Hong Kong have now joined the call for a legislated minimum wage for all Hong Kong workers while continuing the campaign for a wage increase for foreign domestic workers and the abolition of the levy.

In Taiwan, migrant workers have protested against the increase on boarding and lodging fees charged to them. The said increase made the minimum wage hike practically useless.

Meanwhile, in countries such as South Korea and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, labor protection for migrant workers has remained insignificant that, in turn, has forced, hundreds of thousands of foreign laborers to run away from their abusive employers and become undocumented migrants. As undocumented migrants, they are then hounded like criminals and treated as such.

Unappreciated “peso appreciation”

For Filipino migrant workers, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo can release tons of statements applauding the strengthening of the peso and the supposed economic development of the country. In the end, such news do not mean anything as their families struggle to make ends meet like most of the families of peasants and workers in the country.

The trickle down effect of the “economic recovery” has not happened and will never

happen for such “recovery” is artificial and not long lasting.

The Philippine government's policies are geared not towards building a strong and sound economy. It is directed towards serving the interests of foreign multinationals and the few rich clans that dominate Philippine industries and agriculture. Thus the gap between the rich and the poor in the country is getting wider under GMA's rule.

Ibon Foundation's research has revealed that “based on various years of the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES), income distribution is skewed and has worsened since 1985. Over the period, the share of the poorest 60% of families in the national income decreased by 1.8 percentage points while the top 20% were able to increase their share by 1.2 percentage points.” (Guzman, Rosario Bella: The Philippine Poverty Situation: Beyond Poverty Measures, Inequality Grows, 10 May 2007.

According to the group, the richest 20% of the population account for 53% of total national income while the bottom 20% get only 4.63 percent. The income of the richest 10% of households is 21 times that of the poorest 10 percent.

For as long as such a situation persists, GMA's projection of a bright future for Filipinos, including those overseas, shall remain – as all her promises have proven to be – worthless and empty.#



Workers in Asia-Pacific have borne the brunt of attacks of neoliberal globalization to their wage, employment security and rights

APMM joins AMRC 30th Anniversary

THE Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) joined the Asia Monitor Resource Centre (AMRC) in celebrating its 30th anniversary with an international conference on “Labour Resurgence Under Globalization” from 27 to 28 August at BP International Hotel, Hong Kong.

APMM attended the conference together with its partner migrant organizations in Hong Kong as well as labor groups and institutions in the region. Major international, regional and national based trade union formations were present in the conference.

The conference discussed issues concerning Asian labor movement, informalization of labor, labor solidarity and the occupational health and safety issues in the region.

The conference ended up with a solidarity messages and cultural performances among the participants including migrant groups in Hong Kong.#

New Labor Attache of MECO meets Filipino Migrant Organizations

THE new Labor Attache of MECO, Atty. Arturo Sabulao announced that their new stress would be to get rid or weaken the broker system in Taiwan. This new emphasis is contained in a directive sent out by Philippine Labor Secretary Brion. The Labor Attache added that there are ongoing talks between MECO and the CLA on this matter.

But during the course of the dialogue with migrants organizations on August 19, Atty. Sabulao admitted that it is the OFW who should initiate talks with his/her employer to agree to direct hiring. In effect, direct hiring continues to be non-mandatory. Another issue that is subject to talks between MECO and the CLA is about a new standard employment contract and the nullification of an addendum to the contracts of the migrant workers.

The new Labor Attache was surprised when he was told by Dave Chang, the chairperson of Migrante International - Taiwan chapter that the Balik Manggagawa (return migrants) program of the POEA is not being implemented for OFWs from Taiwan. This means that rehires who would just need to exit Taiwan twice for a nine year period would need to pay again for their placement fees and documentation costs before returning back to the island.

Mr. Sabulao also admitted that the addendum which the POEA itself legalizes through a memorandum circular becomes legal when the OFWs agree to sign their names on this.

Migrante International criticized the Labor Attache when he stated that he plans to disallow the personal cell phones of OFWs who would be sheltered in MECO. He said that the shelter is a safe house but later contradicted himself by saying that he plans to hold seminars and computer trainings in said shelter.

When told by Migrante that they have a hard time in requesting OFWs to be sheltered in MECO, the Labor Attache merely stated that not all OFWs with cases can take refuge there.

With regards to the issue of limited or no day off for those working in homes, Atty. Sabulao said he would take this up with the CLA.

Overall the migrant workers cannot hope much for the new Labor Attache especially on the effect of the new minimum wage hike on them which was implemented in July 1. Atty. Salubao wants to implement direct or name hiring but, as long as the Balik Manggagawa program is not implemented, this means nothing. His proposal also to have a standard employment contract would also mean nothing if side agreements are still allowed including the addendum which the POEA itself implements.

It is only through the migrant workers collective actions can these proposals come true. It has been proven already by the Formosa Plastics Corporation workers that this can be done.#

Filipinos, solidarity groups protest arrest of Joema



FILIPINOS and solidarity groups around the world are up in arms against the arrest of Prof. Jose Maria Sison and the ransacking of his house, those of other Filipino progressives in The Netherlands and the International Information Office of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP).

Human rights groups believed that the arrest was politically-motivated because the charges of “multiple murders” were fabricated. Similar charges were dismissed by the Philippine Supreme Court in July 2, 2007.

Peace activists also expressed their concern on the impacts of the actions of the Dutch authorities and the Philippine government on the peace negotiations between the NDFP and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP).

Supporters of the professor said that they'll continue their protests until Sison is released without conditions.#

ACCORDING to UNIFIL chairperson Dolores Balladares, the significant increase in the number of organizations as well as delegates reflect a more heightened involvement of the migrant workers in discussing major issues that affect their sector, their families and the country as whole.

Similar to the first summit, this year's event was jointly organized by the Abra Tinguian Ilocano Society (ATIS), Cordillera Alliance (CORALL), Filipino Migrant Workers' Union (FMWU), United Pangasinan in Hong Kong (UPHK) and the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-MIGRANTE-HK) and supported by the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).

Institutions that have consistently upheld and supported efforts for the empowerment of women and migrant workers such as the Mission for Migrant Workers (MFMW), Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge (BHMWR) and the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) also took part in the activity.

Five workshops were conducted on major issues, namely: 1. On the POEA Guidelines, overcharging, illegal charges and government exaction; 2. On Services and Protection of the Philippines and Hong Kong Governments; 3. On the Human Security Act and the Human Rights Situation in the Philippines; 4. On the Campaign for a Legislated Minimum Wage; and, 5. On the Redevelopment of Central, Privatization in Hong Kong, and the Displacement of Migrant Workers.



Filipino women migrant workers in Hong Kong came together anew to affirm the ir position taken in the first summit, unite on new issues confronting them, and plan on a common paltform of actions.

Second Filipino Women Migrant Worker's Summit marks a more empowered migrants movement

More than 450 delegates from 110 organizations from the cross section of the Filipino community in Hong Kong participated in the Filipino Women Migrant Workers Summit 2007 that was held at the Rayson Huang Theatre of the Hong Kong University on August 26 this year.

To provide additional information on these topics, special guest speakers presented vital inputs. From the MIGRANTE International, Ms. Connie Bragas-Regalado, who also represented Concern No. 16 of the International League of Peoples' Struggles, gave a highly-informative and analytical keynote address that shed light on the national situation facing families of migrant workers in the Philippines as well as the trend that the labor-export program of the Philippine government is taking.

According to her, the current situation in the country compares to the "dark ages" wherein the promises of Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo have been turning out emptier than before. In particular, she scored the government's plan of one million jobs a year to mean jobs overseas; social safety nets that are in contrast with the rising cost of health, education and housing; and peace in Mindanao that is not the objective of the

government's military offensives in the said region.

She attested that programs of the government meant an increase and further systematization of the export of Filipino labour even while, in the global context, the rights of migrant workers are abused right and left due to the global economic crisis and the hysteria of anti-terrorism.

For the Hong Kong government concerns, Ms. Elizabeth Tang of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, asserted the need to have a certain level of economic protection through a legislated minimum wage which should include migrant workers. She congratulated the organizers of the summit which according to her was the biggest ever convened in terms of migrants' movement.

Ms. Jackie Hung from the Hong Kong Campaign for the Advancement of Human Rights and Peace and Philippines (HKCAHRPP) and the Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese won the hearts of the migrants when she presented her experience on the human rights situation in the Philippines as part of the Hong Kong Mission last year and as a representative of the HKCAHRPP at the Second Permanent Peoples Tribunal in The Netherlands this year.

The jam-packed workshop groups received additional theoretical inputs from individual speakers like Ms. Analea Escrea of the Ecumenical Institute for Labour Education and Research (EILER) and Mr. Noel Colina who explained the basis for a just minimum wage.

National Coalition for the Protection of Workers' Rights representative, Mr. Marlon Torres elaborated on the current human rights situation in the Philippines and in the

STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS

Suti, 32 years old is from Jember Timir. From October 2002-November 2005, she worked as a chef in a restaurant in Macau and did domestic work in the house of the employer. She earned MOP1,300 a month which was later raised to only MOP2,000.

In December 2005, Suti's visa expired. Some part time jobs were offered her but the pay was only enough for her daily needs and room rent.

A relationship with another migrant worker resulted to her pregnancy in late 2006. Her live-in partner also lost his job and became an undocumented migrant in January 2007. They did odd jobs to

survive but were paid little amount. They were later asked to leave their small room and were forced to stay in parks, restaurants, toilets and under bridges.

On 23 June 2007, Suti was brought to a public hospital when a someone saw her labouring in an isolated area of a ferry pier. A kind doctor allowed her 10 days stay to recuperate and waived her hospital bills. A hospital staff later accompanied her to the Macau Immigration office.

Suti had to report weekly to the Immigration office. The couple's friends and the members of the ATKI-Macau and Migrante-Macau visited them in their makeshift home, brought them food,

baby's milk and diapers. Plane tickets were also acquired for their return to Indonesia.

Suti went home in July. Her story depicted how strong women are despite the problems they encounter in Macau.

Her story also reflected that only through migrants' self-help community organizations can they find support and strength. Without the grassroots migrant providers, migrants advocates from the religious and the migrants community, their government representatives would remain silent, worst, inutile.

Southern Tagalog Region. This was boosted by a sharing by Ms. Marissa Dumanjug-Palo of the NDFP Section of the Joint Secretariat monitoring of the Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law (CARHRIHL).

Urgent action resolutions were approved in the second summit. Some of the actions that were decided on included a mass mobilization dubbed as "Walk for Justice" on September 23 to seek justice for victims of human rights abuses, educational forums on the minimum wage and the redevelopment plan of Central, picking up the ante again for the campaign against POEA guidelines and expose its lies and inutility, and campaigning for reforms in the judicial system and police procedures pertaining to cases of foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong.

The delegates also unanimously approved a resolution to support and join in the establishment of the International Migrants' Alliance (IMA) that is set to have its founding assembly in May 2008. The IMA is envisioned to become the first grassroots-based international formation of migrant workers that will carry the fight for the rights and wellbeing of migrants all over the world.

"The governments of the Philippines and Hong Kong are in for a bigger movement of Filipino women migrant workers determined to advance their rights and wellbeing as well as those of their families," Dolores Balladares, chairperson of the United Filipinos in Hong Kong said.#

"Resolve overcharging, improve services" Indonesian migrants call for HK and own gov't to address concerns

"AS the number of Indonesian domestic workers rises up, overcharging by recruitment agencies remain rampant while services of the Indonesia government to migrant workers continuously deteriorate."

This was declared today by Eni Lestari, chairperson of the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers in HK, as hundreds of Indonesian migrant workers trooped to the Indonesian Consulate General to demand resolution to the long-standing issue of overcharging of recruiters as well as to score the inadequate services that the Consulate provide to the their nationals in Hong Kong.

"Overcharging of recruitment agencies is a plague that, sadly, the Indonesian government has failed to stamp out and instead has even helped perpetuate. Even the Hong Kong government has a hand for the non-stop exploitation of recruitment agencies as it also fails to implement its policy of 10% of the minimum salary ceiling for recruitment fee," she added

Lestari said even Indonesian migrants who process a new contract with a different employer are forced by the Consulate to pass through recruiters and thus are forced to pay more.



Indonesian migrant workers in HK intensify campaign for their rights

Aside from the overcharging issue, the protesters also hit the Indonesian Consulate for the "inadequate services and protection" it provides to IMWs.

The rallyists demanded for comprehensive improvement in the services of the Indonesian Consulate that included the opening of migrant-related services on Sundays, opening of Consulate services to migrant workers for a full eight hours during weekdays, and non-discrimination in dealing with IMWs.

The group also submitted a petition signed by 12,000 migrant workers calling for the scrapping of government policies that allow for overcharging as well as demanding the Indonesian Consulate to allow direct hiring for IMWs processing their contracts in Hong Kong.#

MECO Gives Up Fight on Negative Effects of Minimum Wage Hike on Migrant Workers in Taiwan

NEW Philippine Labor Representative Atty. Arturo Sabulao has practically given up on the negative effect of the new minimum wage hike on overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) in Taiwan. He said that OFWs who are covered by Taiwan's labor law have already agreed in writing to have their employers deduct a higher amount for their board and lodging fee to offset the increase in the wage hike implemented in July 1.

He also said that the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) will not push the Council of Labor Affairs (CLA) of Taiwan to include those working in homes in the increase as their wages are already high. The Labor Attache also added these workers are not covered by the Labor Standards Law anyway.

This position of the Philippine government was aired out in a meeting between the Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) and Filipino migrant organizations on August 19. It shows again the inutility of said office in defending the rights and welfare of OFWs in Taiwan.#



Filipinos in Taiwan expressed their opposition to the increase in board and lodging fee that nullified any benefit of the minimum wage hike increase.

MECO surrenders sensitive cases to Taiwan authorities

MIGRANTE International – Taiwan criticized Atty. Carlo Aquino of MECO for agreeing to the Taiwan government's proposition that they will be the one to handle sensitive cases including rape. Aquino, who is the head of MECO's Assistance to Nationals (ATN) section, also stated that this is not a problem to them even if Taiwanese authorities do not report to their office such cases involving Filipino migrant workers.

Aquino explained that MECO was once embarrassed by a Taiwanese court that sought a Filipina from them for a hearing. The said Filipina was raped and MECO assisted the worker in forging a settlement with her assailant.

Three points were brought out by Migrante against this position of the Philippine government. Firstly, MECO's surrendering of its responsibility to take care of the rights and welfare of its own nationals in Taiwan. Secondly, MECO is accepting the Taiwan authorities' contention that it is inept in handling such cases. Lastly, Migrante expressed its concern of whitewash of such cases, especially if the perpetrators of such crimes are influential and or government people?

Migrante International gave out the example of rape victim "Rose". The perpetrator of the crime was convicted only because he was a political enemy of the ruling party of Taiwan and of the widespread publicity it generated. There were even reports which came out of the local media that MECO sold out "Rose's" case when its lawyers agreed to settle the case even if this is not allowed under Taiwanese law. Of course, MECO denied this allegation.

For Migrante International, it is the main responsibility of the Philippine government to provide shelter to all Filipino migrant workers in need. The migrant organization said that it will never agree to MECO's policy to ask first the approval of a Taiwanese local bureau before its national is allowed to be sheltered, more so if MECO allows its migrant workers to be sheltered by their private brokers because they pay said agencies a monthly service fee.#

International Conference on Border Control and Empowerment of Immigrant Brides

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