

News Digest

March
2008



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

Asian domestic workers in HK call for wage hike on Women's Day

THIS YEAR'S CELEBRATION of International Women's Day in Hong Kong drew around 3,000 foreign domestic workers (FDWs) from Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Philippines in a rally organized by the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) on Sunday, March 9.

Predominantly women, the workers urged the government for a substantial wage increase considering that Hong Kong has enjoyed economic rebound for four consecutive years now with a current HK\$115 billion budget surplus.

The FDWs lamented that they have been left behind while the HK government gives out relief packages worth HK\$100 billion to the local population. According to the AMCB, they do not begrudge the act of giving relief to disadvantaged groups in the society and social services that will be benefited by the surplus. They are, however, extremely disappointed and angered by the fact that the Hong Kong government has not thought of any relief for FDWs who, as women and as migrants, are one of the most disadvantaged groups here.

Since 1999 their wages have been cut by HK\$590 but up to now the government has given back only HK\$210 by piecemeal for the past three years despite their considerable contribution to the Hong Kong economy, according to the group.

Currently, Hong Kong is ranked as one of the top richest countries in the world, an increase of income from the gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic products (GDP) of US\$188.8 billion.

(turn to p. 2)



The protest action on the International Women's Day 2008 was the first major rally of the AMCB for the year on their campaign for a wage hike and the abolition of the levy.

Such Misery with a Meager Salary

IF WE ARE to divide the current minimum allowable wage of HK\$3,480 by 12 hours for approximately 26 days, the FDW is only receiving HK\$ 11.15 per hour. Imagine how much is received by those working beyond 12 hours.

FDWs are overworked and underpaid, especially with the current minimum allowable wage. Further aggravating it is the looming economic crisis that already impacts on both the remittances we send to our families and the expenses we incur due to inflation happening here in Hong Kong.

Although HSBC forecasted consumer price inflation to edge up to an average 3.9% this year from an average 2.0% in 2007, the figure might rise up to 4.0 per cent or beyond in some months.

Should this happen, all the more should the Hong Kong government extend to foreign domestic workers its assistance and protection from the price inflation.

FDWs contribute around HK\$13.7 billion to the Gross Domestic Product, or around more than 1% of the total GNP.

In addition, a senior economist from the Economic Analysis and Business Facilitation Unit of HK's Financial Services Bureau has even commended FDWs for significantly contributing to HK economy. Without [them], he said, Hong Kong women would not have been able to join the labor market.#

(From the AMCB wage submission)

(from p. 2)

Lending their support to the migrants' cause and marching all the way from Causeway Bay to the Central Government Offices were Hong Kong Legislator Leung aka Long Hair and representatives from the Hong Kong Women Workers Association led by Mei Lin.

They also participated in a short program in Causeway Bay where Indonesians, Thai and Nepali migrants displayed their ethnic culture in songs and dances. Certainly, the event also served as a venue of social and cultural harmony among local and migrant workers.

Another short program was conducted at the CGO before the AMCB submitted a petition to the HK government that included: 1. Increase wages of foreign domestic workers to a level that is substantial and commensurate to the Hong Kong standard of living; 2 Remove the HK\$9,600 levy imposed on employers of foreign domestic workers; and 3. Provide a just, transparent and scientific formula for the minimum wage review.#

STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS

For refusing to illegal salary deduction, FDW and employer terrorized by agency

YUNI ISAN Indonesian migrant worker. She has been working in Hong Kong for just six months. Before she arrived in HK, the recruitment agency told her that she had to pay to the agency HK\$21,000 by through salary deduction for seven months. Because she didn't know anything about HK regulations, she accepted it before she went to HK.

When she was already in Hong Kong, she learned that the agreement was illegal and it was against HK regulations. Because of that, she stopped the payment after three months deduction.

The agency started to pressure her by calling her employer. They even visited her employer's office and asked her

employer to sign the termination letter that stated that Yuni has stolen her employer's things, and she couldn't work. But the employer refused to sign it, and defended her employee.

Knowing that the agency couldn't control both of them, and because the agency also couldn't file a case, the agency started terrorizing both of them.

Everyday and every hour for three months, until now, the agency kept calling Yuni's employer's house.

Because of that, Yuni called ATKI for assistance, she and her employer wanted to stop the harassment done by the agency.#

Roque: Repat was part of government's effort to assist Filipino workers *Migrante: Sorry? What did you say?..*

By John Monterona, MIGRANTE - Middle East

THIS IS THE very first time we're hearing from the acting chief of the Department of Labor and OWWA Administrator Marianito Roque that **repatriation is part of government's effort to assist Filipino workers in distress.**

Mr. Roque has made the pronouncement that repatriation is part of government's effort after his office in Manila has already received the confirmation of the flight bookings of the 62 distressed OFWs in KSA among the more than 200 who have been in the deportation centers since late quarter of the year.

Last week, it was also announced by Vice President Noli De Castro, who is also serving as Presidential Adviser for OFW affairs, that there are a few stranded OFWs who are due for repatriation from Saudi Arabia pending confirmation of their flight bookings.

We are used to hearing series of pronouncements from the Arroyo administration that stranded OFWs will

be home soon. The fact is, the Arroyo administration, DoLE and OWWA were only pressured to put forth its effort primarily because Migrante International, Migrante-ME and UNIFIL-MIGRANTE-HK and other chapters around the world have intensified its campaign for the immediate repatriation of stranded OFWs in Saudi Arabia especially those seeking refuge in Kandera Bridge in Jeddah.

Migrante immediately commenced their collective actions, launched several dialogues, conducted pickets and rallies in the DFA main office in Manila, and issued statement of condemnation against the Arroyo administration's continued neglect to their worsening plight. All these actions undertaken by Migrante forced the inutile Arroyo administration to "exert an effort" as per Mr. Roque's pronouncement, to assist Filipino workers that are in distress abroad and want to go home.

Mr. Roque's unlikely acceptance that repatriation is part of government's effort, **(take note please: he used the term**

"effort" instead of "responsibility") is like making a *promise whose words are coming from his nose and not from his mouth.* To say this in a more appropriate way, **he was forced to pronounce that repatriation is part of government's effort so that they can claim before the very eyes of the public that Mrs. Arroyo's administration is doing good for the protection and welfare of OFWs.**

We would like to remind Mr. Roque that there are still more than a hundred OFWs in the deportation centers in Jeddah and as per our Migrante-Jeddah reports they are still seeing a few OFWs who are now under the Kandera Bridge. Again, they are runaways who can't afford anymore to stay working with their errant and abusive employers. They are runaway OFWs who are often manhandled by their employer, who are often harassed sexually, who are often not paid for their labor, who often their being degraded. They are our fellow OFWs working as domestic helpers and constructions workers.

They make up the majority of OFW population in the Middle East. Unfortunately, many of them are also abused and harassed.

Some hundred OFWs in distress are also at Philippine Embassy's Bahay Kalinga in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The above figures do not include the more than 200 OFWS in distress in Jordan including the Domingo sisters, who were pressured to pay for their placement and airfare costs as they were directly hired by the principal agent who is a friend of a certain Enrico Garcia and Alexander Maestrado of the Philippine Embassy's ATN (Assistant to the Nationals) in Jordan. Worse, ATN Garcia is pressuring the Domingo sisters to pay US\$1,500 plus airfare costs of Php40,000 as per their short messages sent to their father and was confirmed by Migrante ME during a short talk to one of the sisters on April 5.

There are more to add: the more than 30 OFWs in distress in Kuwait and more than 20 in Dubai, UAE including the distressed OFWs working for Princess House party organizers.

According to Mr. Nhel Morona, Migrante-UAE Secretary-General, three (3) of the OFW-victims of Princess House party organizers are now in jail. Two OFW women were accused of scratching a page in Koran, the holy bible in Islam.

And just yesterday, distressed OFW Renato Garcia was also picked up and handcuffed by Dubai Police in front of the Philippine Consular Office after seeking

assistance to a certain ATN Mendoza on a case filed against him by his employer.

To OFW Garcia's surprise after talking to Vice-Consul Mendoza and upon going out of the Consular office, Dubai Police arrived, picked and handcuffed him and brought him to jail.

What is irking us is when Vice-Consul Mendoza and other PCG staff were informed of the incident; they were hesitant to go out of the office to provide assistance to OFW Garcia.

What made the Dubai Police aware that OFW Garcia was in the PCG office that time? We are not deducting the possibility that PCG staff have tipped off the Dubai Police that OFW Garcia was at the PCG office that time, as he was properly identified by the Police and upon seeing him, they immediately picked and handcuffed him.

What maybe their motive of giving information of his whereabouts? Simply because OFW Garcia's case is under Migrante's care. Not remote. We have had several experiences before like this.

Without hesitation, **we demand the Arroyo administration and Mr. Roque, not to exert an effort, but to perform its state responsibility of providing assistance to all OFWs in distress and the runaways in the entire Middle East.** What we have



The plight of stranded workers again brought to fore the miserable situation of Filipinos in the Middle East and the dire condition of services that the Philippine government provides them.

mentioned above are only a few of the thousand OFWs in deportation centers, shelters and jails in the entire Middle East.

Protecting OFWs, in distress or runaways, is a **state responsibility**. It's not a matter of choice to exert effort or not. It is inherent to every government. The government has an obligation to protect its people especially those working abroad who are not only working for their own families to survive but also contributing much to keep its nation's economy afloat.

But sad to say, OFW's significant contributions in keeping the economy afloat have not been given due worth by the Arroyo administration. Like previous administrations, instead of providing OFWs' genuine service and programs, continued neglect and disservice to OFWs and families are still observed and in fact are becoming extensive.

Worse, their US\$25 contributions now amounting to Php10-B held in trust to the government through the OWWA have been misused and corrupted.

To Mr. Roque and to Mrs. Arroyo's administration: Please be reminded that protecting OFWs is a state responsibility. Your neglectful administration is exhausting us, OFW, and our families as we have to repeatedly remind you of your responsibilities as public servants.

Mrs. Arroyo's administration does not deserve even a single "thank you" from OFWs and our families for its effort to assist OFWs in distress who have long been neglected and suffered a lot under her seven years (7) in office.

Yala! (Arabic word meaning "Go") Do your job conscientiously as public servants.

ANNOUNCEMENT

IMA Founding Assembly, 15 - 16 June 2008, Hong Kong



www.pinas.net/ima

To all those joining or interested to join the IMA Founding Assembly, the deadline for the submission of registration forms is on 30 April 2008. Please send the forms by email at ima.sect@gmail.com or fax to **(852) 27354559**.

Tokyo Grants Special Permission to Kurdish-Filipino Family

A Victory against Racial Prejudice and Discrimination

By Butch Pongos, Filipino Migrant Center - Japan

AFTER FOUR YEARS of hard-fought battle to keep their family intact, a Kurdish-Filipino family is finally granted a special permission to remain in Japan no less by the Justice Ministry. Now, Zalman Taskin, a 32-year-old Kurdish man from Turkey and his Filipina wife, Vida Teresita Beltran, 41, along with their 7-year old daughter Zilan can go on with their life minus the fear of deportation and separation.

For the Justice Ministry, it may be easy to overturn an earlier decision by the Tokyo District Court to deport the Kurdish father to Turkey and the Filipino mother and daughter to the Philippines. But for the family and their supporters, it was like passing through the eye of a needle at a juncture where being non-Japanese in Japan seemed almost like a crime.

Vida, a community leader herself having been the chairperson of the Kalipunan ng mga Filipinong Nagkakaisa (KAFIN-Migrante) in Saitama Prefecture for the last five years, says it meant a lot to her and her family that they can now move around freely and continue with what they have started doing in Japan. As a community leader, Vida has been active promoting the rights of migrants, particularly women, who have dominated the make of Filipinos in Japan over the last ten years.

In view of the series of high profile crimes in Japan involving Filipino women, like the



The Zilan campaign showed that determination, unity of migrant workers and active solidarity of the local people can bring about gains in the promotion of the rights of the disadvantaged people.

recent death of Crisanta Lopez and her 7-month old baby, and the gruesome murder of 22-year old Honiefait Ratilla Kamiosawa, Vida says there is a need to create awareness among Japanese on why Filipinos come to Japan.

“We need to correct wrong perceptions about us. I believe that the rise in the number of crimes targeting Filipino women, in particular, is a by-product of repressive and discriminatory state policies that portray foreign migrants in Japan, in general, as criminals on the loose”, Vida said.

“This is something that I have thought of long time ago. Now that I have the liberty to move around Japan, I will spearhead the campaign to propagate issues affecting the Filipino community and to rally the Japanese people to support our cause for equal rights and protection, and against State policies that heightens our marginalization in society”, Vida added. Aside from being a leader of KAFIN-Migrante, Vida also co-coordinates the formation of a chapter of GABRIELA. She and Zalman, are also active in forming solidarity networks for minority groups in Japan.#

APMM attends Advocacy for Migrants Meeting in Kuwait

THE APMM ATTENDED an Advocacy for the Poor in Kuwait Meeting on March 18, 2008. This was organized by Reverend Andrew Thompson of the St. Paul's Anglican Church at the office of the Social Work Society of Kuwait (SWSK) headed by Sheikha Bibi Al Sabah.

The Sheika is a relative of the Amir of Kuwait and is also advocating migrants' rights among others.

Most of those who came were members of the congregation of St. Paul's. These included teachers, corporate people, lawyers, a doctor and others. The British Ambassador to Kuwait, Stuart Laing, Sheryl

Mairza of Operation Hope and Bishop Camillo Ballin of the Roman Catholic Church also attended the activity.

At present the SWSK has drafted amendments to the labor law of Kuwait and is advocating that domestic workers be covered by said law. They also did two studies on domestic workers and on expatriate workers of other job categories. They do counselling work and have pro bono lawyers available for those in need.

Those who joined the forum agreed that they would work closely with the SWSK in advocating migrants' rights and in referring cases to said organization. This

also includes widening the network of the Society; providing volunteer workers to said group; publicizing the conditions and issues of migrant workers; and others.

It is hoped that such cooperation will lead to the short and long term upliftment of the dismal situation of migrant workers of all nationalities in Kuwait.

Kuwait has in recent years been a major destination of foreign workers. The APMM currently works with Filipino migrants in Kuwait. In fact, an organization of Filipino migrant workers, the MIGRANTE-Kuwait was recently established in the said country.#

Filipinos and locals protest Arroyo's trip to HK



Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's visit to HK was an occasion to highlight the concerns of Filipino migrant workers. Especially as it occurred amidst the problem of soaring cost of rice, corruption and the plunder of public funds and OFW money became hotter issues for OFWs facing hardships.

MORE THAN 2,000 MEMBERS of the Gloria Step Down Movement in Hong Kong (GSM-HK) staged a rally in front of the Grand Hyatt Hotel upon her arrival in HK on March 30 to protest against President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's corrupt administration and neglect of the welfare of the overseas Filipino workers and the country as a whole.

GSM-HK spokesperson Eman Villanueva stressed that OFWs in HK did not welcome the Philippine president because of anti-migrant policies that have caused them so much suffering. In addition, he criticized the president as "immoral and shameless" for the estimated PhP2 million that cost the government for the use of the Grand Hyatt Hotel facilities and accommodation.

Instead of lavishly spending for a huge entourage, she should address the looming crisis of rice shortage, Villanueva said. According to reports, 20 OFWs who booked in Philippine Airlines Flight PR 306 to take the next flight after GMA's party paid them PhP3,000 each plus a round-trip ticket so they would give up their seats to accommodate them.

GSM-HK urged that GMA's trip in Hong Kong should be fully audited and investigated. He maintained that even the OWWA Tambayan presented as a program for HK OFWs reeks of another 'gimik' that'll only squeeze out more money from hapless workers.

Meanwhile, the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan in Hong Kong (New Patriotic Alliance or BAYAN), called the rally as a people power, HK-style.

"HK-style people power against GMA is alive. Drums, bamboo poles and Chinese-

type banners have given this rally its HK flavor. As colourful and as militant, the presence of local HK organizations and Asian migrants also disgusted of GMA's rule in the Philippines makes this rally unique, more meaningful and has shown that solidarity is alive in Hong Kong," said Norman Uy Carnay, country information officer of Bayan in HK.

Bayan-HK also lauded the GSM-HK for being able to mount the rally despite the limitations imposed on them by the HK Police. Carnay relayed that organizers of the rally had to go through "difficult hurdles" in order to mount the said

mobilization. He reported that in the series of meetings with the HK Police, GSM-HK first applied to hold the protest on the park in front of the Grand Hyatt but was denied. The group had to negotiate hard in order to obtain permission to protest in the second nearest area to the venue.

Expressing solidarity and support to the Filipino migrants were local representatives from the Justice and Peace Commission of the HK Catholic Diocese, HK Federation of Catholic Students, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, HK Federation of Catholic Students and Legislative Councilor Leung aka Long Hair.

HR activists hound GMA on meet with business leaders

On March 31, another protest action against human rights violations committed by the Arroyo regime was held by the HK Campaign for the Advancement of Human Rights and Peace in the Philippines (HKCAHRPP) in front of the Conrad International Hotel where GMA spoke at the Asian Investment Conference. HKCAHRPP urged the business community to desist from accepting GMA's offers of investments which they believed will be "tainted with corruption and killings of activists."

The lead convenor of HK Campaign for the Advancement of Human Rights and Peace in the Philippines (HKCAHRPP), Jackie Hung, said they sent a letter to HK Chief Executive Donald Tsang urging him to directly express to Arroyo concerns about corruption and human rights scandals rocking her administration.



HR activists face off with the police to call on to the HK business community to stop supporting GMA's 'murderous' regime.

She said the Arroyo administration has ignored the recommendations of UN expert Philip Alston, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the HKCAHRPP.

The HKCAHRPP conducted two human rights fact-finding missions to the Philippines, in 2006 and in 2007, with its reports urging witness protection, speedier investigation of cases, and the immediate scrapping of the counter-insurgency program "Oplan Bantay Laya."

KGL workers stage brief action against delay in salaries

SICK AND TIRED of the empty promises of their employer, more than 20 Filipino migrant workers of Kuwait & Gulf Link Transport Company (KGL) staged a one day work stoppage on March 6, to demand payment for their February salary. This was the third time that the workers undertook such an action to shed light on their dire situation and assert their rights as workers.



Workers of KGL are determined to advance their demands. More actions are expected to be conducted while the management continues to renege on their commitments.

KGL had promised on February 20 that their salary for said month would be given on or before March 2. However, the company renege on its pledge to comply with this by moving the date to March 10. Not surprisingly, the Philippine Labor Attaché to Kuwait agreed to this new arrangement.

The workers decided to take the matter into their own hands by taking such an action. KGL management immediately agreed to pay their February salary but the workers were marked absent that day.

Another immediate problem of the migrant workers is the company's insistence that those who have finished their contracts, namely Jason Baldoza and Arnold Mirando, should shoulder their own airfare back home.

Their working permits ended on March 7 and the company insisted that they should pay the penalty for this. This was raised to Labor Attaché de Jesus who promised that the workers would not need to pay a single cent for this and that their plane tickets would soon arrive from the POEA.

The above ran counter to what was stipulated in their original contracts. Other violations of their contract include monthly deduction of up to KD16 (US\$54) from their KD70 (US\$255.5) monthly wage. And that they should be given free board and lodging. KD5 was deducted for their lodging; another KD5 for their transportation to and from work; and KD6 for 17 months for either an alleged loan, placement fee and airfare to Kuwait. The latter were not really clear for which this should be paid for.

Labor Attaché de Jesus even castigated the newly hired workers who comprised the majority of the migrant workers for signing a side agreement in the Philippines agreeing to the alleged loan. For those who finished their contract, he suggested that it would be better if the workers complained in the Philippines.

Almost all the workers are cleaners while others do other odd jobs. Because of the low wages they are earning and the constant delay in their salaries, many of them foraged in trash bins to sell and earn something to buy food. They also were forced to eat expired food given to them and had accumulated a debt of KD500 in a nearby store to obtain something to eat.

The workers though remained vigilant and promised that they would not relent in their struggle until all the deductions stopped and those collected be refunded to them.#

Migrante-UAE assists victims of Princess House Party Organizer in Dubai

TEN FILIPINOS WERE hired to work in different hotels in UAE and they were issued visit visa's before they left the Philippines. They were promised that their visa will be transferred into employment once they landed in UAE and their salary would be 750 Dhs. (P8,250.00) for ten-hour a day work.

Unfortunately, they were forced to work up to 20 hours and were not allowed to have days-off. They eat only once a day and if they refused to follow instructions, their salaries were withheld. They suffered verbal abuse from their employer. The women were locked up in their accommodation on different occasions.

Upon learning of their plight, MIGRANTE-UAE brought their case to the attention of Philippine Consulate Dubai through POLO OWWA (Hon. Virginia Clavez – Labour Attache) who told them they can not do anything since they are just visit visa holders and were not covered by the OWWA Policy.

They raised their problem to the Ministry of Labor in UAE and they were told that they have only three options: 1) Go back to work; 2) Be cancelled and face entry ban; or 3). Push their case to court.

The victims decided to settle for the second option hoping that the Philippine Consulate and POLO OWWA Dubai were at their back to help them. They filed these complaints against the agency: Illegal recruitment, Harassment, and Illegal Salary deductions. To date the case is still ongoing.#

APMM NEWS DIGEST

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