

# News Digest

Jan. - Feb.  
2005



APMM

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

## Crackdown on undocumented migrants in Malaysia meets protest

HONG KONG GROUPS URGED the Malaysian government to respect the rights of undocumented workers.

Migrant workers' organizations and institutions, human rights organizations, students, youth and trade unions in Hong Kong submitted an appeal to the Malaysian government to immediately stop the massive crackdown on undocumented migrant workers.

"We urge the Malaysian government to respect the human rights and uphold the 1999 Bangkok Declaration on Undocumented/Irregular Migrants signed by them," the groups stated.

The Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB), Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM) and the Asian Students Association (ASA) organized the protest action attended by more than 30 individuals in front of the Malaysian Consulate on March 2.

"We are concerned that enormous violations of the human rights of the undocumented migrants would arise, surpassing the violence and inhumane treatment done against the undocumented migrants in the 2002 crackdown," the organizers stated.

Representatives from the Asian Human Rights Commission, Amnesty International-Asia Pacific, Far East

Nepalese Overseas Association, Asosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia and the United Filipinos in Hong Kong called on the Malaysian government to respect the rights of the undocumented workers who have greatly contributed to the economic development of this country.

The protesters submitted a petition signed by 260 individuals and organizations from more than 21 countries worldwide to the representative of the Malaysian Consulate in Hong Kong, addressed to Malaysian Prime Minister YAB Dato Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi.

Earlier, the groups met with Tenaganita director, Dr. Irene Fernandez, a strong advocate fighting for the rights and welfare of the undocumented workers in Malaysia. In the forum, she revealed that Malaysia does not have any clear foreign policy as there is no memorandum of understanding with sending countries.



Dr. Fernandez also expressed deep concern that the crackdown will be carried-out not only by the forces of the immigration, police and military but also by half a million Rela volunteer members recruited by the Malaysian government. These volunteers are armed and would be paid 80 Ringgit (about HK\$150-HK\$160) for every undocumented migrant they catch as incentive to "hunt" the undocumented migrants, according to her.

"Being undocumented workers is an administrative offense but the government is treating the workers as criminals. Whipping or caning arrested workers is a violation of human rights," she said. She reported that 18,000 undocumented workers have been

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already caned despite appeals from local and international organizations.

Undocumented workers in Malaysia is a complicated issue because aside from the Sabah refugees, it includes trafficked women forced into prostitution, women brought in to make babies for sale, and Filipinas married to locals who experienced marriage problems and whose permits are not renewed.

What is even worse is that legal migrant workers who came in documented but were dismissed by their employers were refused legal visa in spite of filing a case against their employers, according to the human rights advocate. "The government is charging 3,000 ringgit for the undocumented workers to be issued visas. It's a money making scheme," she said.

Meanwhile, it was reported that the government has arrested 563 illegal immigrants in the first three days of the crackdown. Among those detained were 370 Indonesians, 108 Filipinos, 18 from Burma, 16 Thais, eight Bangladeshis, four Nepalese, three Pakistanis, and two each from India and Vietnam.

The involvement of more than half-a-million officials and civilian security force volunteers in the nationwide crackdown would certainly create grave human rights abuses, the Hong Kong groups stated.

"In fact, the previous crackdown in 2002 resulted to the forced repatriation of nearly half a million migrants. During that time scores of migrants fell ill due to the unhygienic conditions in the detention centers and a number of women suffered sexual violence. Worst of all, many migrants were caned as a result of the amendment of the Immigration Act," they said.

The protesters called on the Malaysian government and governments of sending countries to address the root causes of forced migration in order to solve the problem of undocumented migrants.

More importantly, they asked the Prime Minister to immediately stop the



crackdown on the undocumented migrants; abolish the 2002 Amended Immigration Act and implement an Immigration Policy that adheres to international human rights standards and instruments; issue extension visas to migrants with pending labor and court cases and allow them to continue their stay and work with employers who wish to sponsor them; implement a policy that will address the trafficking issues of women and children; and establish a Special Commission on Migration for a total review of and map the road to a comprehensive policy for the management of migration that upholds the rights of migrant workers.#

## Reflections on the WSF

By Ramon Bultron

I WAS WITH the 200,000 people who joined the opening march. The march was so colorful and lively! The WSF closing report estimated more than 155,000 participants in the social forum with 35,000 staying in the Youth Camp, 6,880 lecturing in hundreds of workshops, and 135 countries represented in the whole festival.

My participation in the WSF was through Our World is not for Sale



(OWINFS) network. It is a global network of different NGO's and people's organizations working on trade and agreements issues and critical of the World Trade Organization. I also represented the Hong Kong Peoples Alliance on WTO or HKPA.

The HKPA is a formation of different local and regional NGOs and grassroots organizations that hosted the International Coordinating Network meeting in Hong Kong last February 26-27. It will also host the people's alternative event during the WTO 6th Ministerial Meeting in December 13 - 18 of this year.

I attended the series of OWINFS workshops and strategy sessions on Trade Liberalization and WTO, as well as the migrants workshops.

Most of the OWINFS sessions were highlighted with sharing of what is going on in the WTO, especially in Geneva as well as other negotiations and developments in the different regions. The migrant workshops, on the other hand, discussed issues concerning trafficking, undocumented migrants and forced labor.

It was indeed a meaningful experience where I learned a lot from the sharing of experiences of participants and speakers from various cultural and political backgrounds.

I noticed that most of the sessions I attended fell short of establishing concrete action plans due to time limitations. Since the sessions themselves were introducing diverse issues and ideas, it was impossible to come up with a common plan. I was present in the 4th WSF held in Mumbai and had the same experience.

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# Int'l and HK groups plan for 6th WTO Ministerial Meet

THE HONG KONG PEOPLE'S Alliance (HKPA) on WTO successfully gathered around 250 participants from 23 countries, mostly from Hong Kong and South East Asia, the rest from Asia, the Pacific, the US, Europe, Africa and Latin America, for a two-day conference on 26-27 February 2005 at the City University of Hong Kong.

Representatives came from trade unions, labour groups, migrants, peasants, women, youth, indigenous peoples, and non-government institutions.

Resource speakers presented the global impacts of the World Trade Organization (WTO) on the first day plenary session. Jane Kelsey of the Action for Research Education Network Aotearoa (ARENA New Zealand ) depicted the evil designs of the WTO which extend to the most vulnerable and smallest countries. "When we look at the theory of comparative advantage, we see that foreign companies take control of their natural resources - their forestry, their fisheries, their minerals. It is not about development; it is about a continuation of colonization!" she declared.

Speaking for the HKPA, Au Loong from the Globalization Monitor revealed that after being kept in the dark about the other side of the WTO, Hong Kong civil society now realize the need to tackle the problems that it has brought to the working people. He said that a significant sector of the population has to stand up against privatization.

"The government says that WTO is good but when workers demand for their legitimate rights, the government always says that this is against the WTO agreements," he remarked.

"When we talk of trade in 'trade in goods', we should think of the hands that made them - the workers and the farmers and their rights. When we talk of trade in services, it's about the people who provide those services. Ten years

since it started, the WTO has taught the social movements to protest against the massive displacement and misery that it has caused the people across the globe," Tony Tujan of the Asia Pacific Research Network emphasized in his message.

Elizabeth Tang, chairperson of the HKPA and chief operating officer of the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU), emphasized the significance of the conference in preparation for the WTO 6th ministerial to be held in Hong Kong in December this year. The HKPA working group was composed of the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, Asian Students Association, Asia Monitor Resource Centre, and Documentation Action Group in Asia and the HK-CTU.

The highlights of the conference were tackled in three separate workshops. One was on the themes of the WTO like Agriculture, Non-agriculture Market Access (NAMA), Trade, Security and Development, and General Agreement on Trade and Services. Another workshop was on sectoral issues on labour, migrants, peasants, youth and students, religious groups, children, and women.

Finally, separate working groups were formed to focus on the December event on program, finance, action and mobilization, logistics, documentation, outreach, media and publicity. Reports from the three workshops were tackled on the second day of the conference. Massive education on the issues concerning the WTO was the

priority concern for all groups. In addition, strategies and build-up actions were planned to achieve the main objective of the groups, which is to derail the 6th Ministerial Meeting.

In particular, representatives of the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body presented a four-day program of action in December such as cultural presentations, consulate hopping and solidarity action, aside from launching education and forum on the WTO as build-up activities.

The conference brought about a number of reflections from the participants. These include: the World Trade Organization is damaging; this is a fight on what kind of life we would be living in the future; our environment is not for sale; the WTO is faltering because of the people's movement; know who is the real enemy of the people; do not sell out your future to the rich; and stand in solidarity.

The HKPA, a broad coalition of anti-neoliberalism groups, was set up in September last year. It was decided that the HKPA would coordinate the work in the run-up to HK, in particular with regard to international groups and the working groups that were formed during the conference.#



## A celebration for a cause: MSP 1<sup>st</sup> Anniversary and Solidarity Support to Tsunami victims in Aceh

ON JANUARY 2, THE Macau chapter of the Migrante Sectoral Party of Overseas Filipinos and Their Families gathered its members and friends for the first anniversary of MSP-Macau. The freezing cold weather did not deter members and their family members, friends and supporters to find their way to Portas Barbecue Park where the event was held from 2:30-7:30 pm. Joining them were the Assosiasi Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Macau (ATKI-Macau), Macau Codillerans Association, Light House Baptist Church Mission's Pastor Amante and his members, and the APMM. Edwina Santoyo, Executive Director of the Bethune House Migrant Women's Refuge and the guest speaker, gave an insightful talk on current events related to migrants.

Cyril Cacay and other co-coordinators of MSP-Macau led the welcome ceremony with a candle lighting that symbolised good health for all migrant workers in Macau and the celebration's theme, "*Pasiglahin ang ating pagkakaisa. Laging itaguyod at protektahan karapatan at kagalingan nating mga migrante at ating pamilya*" (Enliven our unity. Let us uphold and protect our rights and well being as migrants and that of our families). The *Panalangin Migrante* (Migrants' Prayer) was read by Teody Padillo and Letty Sumalabe conducted the singing of the Philippine National Anthem. Cultural presentations followed. MSP members from SST-Taipa chapter gracefully danced the Carinosa. ATKI-Macau gaily showed their Indonesian folkdance and two short skits depicting the employment conditions of Indonesian "*Embregadas*" (foreign domestic helpers) in Macau and the excessive fees that the recruitment agencies impose on them. Eilyn Cabanilla read her poem "*Migrante*"

while Analisa Miguel read the "*Kapalit ng Dolyar*", a Gawad Ka Amado Foundation Poetry 1<sup>st</sup> prizewinner, written by Cordillera Alliance's Josefina Pingkihan. Solidarity messages from various MSP chapters worldwide were read. Community singing, dancing and the exchange gifts warmed up everybody. Acknowledgement and closing came from Linda Musni.

While the event was meant for festivity, a minute of silence was offered to the dead and survivors of the deadly Tsunami. In solidarity with the Tsunami survivors in Aceh, Indonesia, ATKI-Macau passed around a collection box where everyone



heartily donated some amount of their hard labour. Earlier that afternoon, ATKI-Macau deferred their New Year and Christmas Party in Camoes Park and used their gathering instead to a traditional ritual of prayer and respect to the affected Aceh people. A MOP1,800 was collected from ATKI-Macau and MSP-Macau's gatherings. Truly, in an organisation, there is strength and solidarity. #

### Tsunami aftermath

## MORE TRAGEDY FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

MORE THAN TWO months after the tragic December 26 tsunami that devastated some Asian countries and claimed more than 150,000 lives, its aftereffects still linger. For the survivors of the tsunami, the main question remains: how to move on and rebuild their lives and livelihood?

This is especially true for undocumented migrant workers as shown by the experiences of Burmese migrants in southern Thailand.

Even before the tsunami, undocumented Burmese migrants in Thailand already have a hard life. With threats of deportation to their poverty-stricken and military-ruled country, their life consists of hiding from authorities. In order to survive, they are forced to accept odd jobs and inhuman working conditions. More than 1 million Burmese live in Thailand and most of them are undocumented migrants.

Almost 5,000 lives of Burmese migrants were lost after the tsunami. Thousands more suffer as they try to live again.

Reports said that during relief operations, many Burmese migrants who were undocumented were not able to get assistance except from some charitable groups and institutions. They were afraid to approach authorities for fear of getting deported. This also happened when the Thailand government offered assistance to tsunami victims to obtain jobs. Since undocumented migrants have no legal identification documents, they were not able to avail of the program. Thus the continued hardships for them.

The tragedy of the tsunami saw many migrant groups working together to give relief to the victims. In Hong Kong for example, the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body (AMCB) and its members conducted continuous solicitation for the victims in Indonesia, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

The plight of undocumented migrants also needs support. Even before the tragedy, undocumented migrants were hidden and unprotected. It shouldn't be so now that their situation has worsened.#



IN TIMES OF crisis, the ordinary people suffer the most. As the Philippine economy reels from its fiscal crisis, the vast majority of the Filipinos who are poor or are in middle income households are ones being made to suffer and bear the price for askewed economic policies.

The 20% increase of the Value Added Tax (VAT) is just one of the long line of regressive taxes that Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has lined up to generate the revenues the country sorely needs. It is a new tax that will surely gravely impact the economic situation of millions of Filipinos.

The said increase that shall hike up VAT from 10% to 12% will affect the most basic and daily commodities of households - food, such as processed meat and dairy products, beverages, communications (ex. phone services), clothing, footwear and other wear, recreation, medical care, water utilities and house rentals. It aims to generate billions for the government's coffer. The Arroyo government, determined to push through with the VAT, was said to have resorted to arm-twisting tactics in order for the Congress to pass the VAT bill (House Bill 3555) that is now sitting in the Senate.

However, various sectors from grassroots groups of peasants and workers to a sizable number of legislators in the Congress and the Senate have expressed strong opposition to the VAT. Primarily, VAT protesters have criticized the principle behind the VAT of passing the burden of the economic crisis to the masses that are actually the ones already suffering the most already. According to the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN, New

# ARROYO GOV'T PUSHES VAT

## Groups unite to oppose regressive taxation

Patriotic Alliance), the VAT is an unjust taxation charged to the people "so that the government can continue paying for bureaucratic corruption, inefficiency and usurious foreign debt servicing (budget)." BAYAN expressed its fear that the current increase is the first step towards increasing the VAT to up to 14%.

For ALERT (Alliance of Legislators Against Regressive Taxation), meanwhile, the VAT hike is "wrong solution" to the inefficiency of the government to collect taxes. They said that from VAT leakage alone, the government already lost P208B from 1998 to 2002. If the 2003 figure is added the leakage will increase to up to a staggering P393.7B! Aside from this, ALERT also scored the very "generous" exemption that the government gives out to big businesses under the old VAT. They reported that in 2003, VAT exemptions amounted to P195.5B which is even more than the P194B budget deficit in 2004.

Series of nationwide protests have already been conducted to the VAT proposal that according to them, is one of the long-standing order of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to the Philippine government. Additionally, VAT oppositionists also scored the lack of public consultation to the VAT bill that was passed in the



Source: [www.geocities.com/arkibongbayan](http://www.geocities.com/arkibongbayan)

Congress dominated by the ruling party of President Arroyo.

Several senators have also expressed their opposition to the Congress bill and have offered their own versions of the tax law. For BAYAN, however, the new proposal by the senators led by Se. Ralph Recto is also not satisfactory because it will still penalize the poor majority of the country's population.

Migrant groups have also expressed their outrage over the VAT including Migrants International and the United Filipinos in Hong Kong (UNIFIL-HK). They said that the VAT will be a burden to the migrant workers because they will ultimately shoulder the increase in expenses of Filipino households. Majority of the migrant workers are breadwinners of their families.

The VAT debacle has shown that a grim future awaits the Filipino people as the Arroyo government scrambles to raise money to save the bankrupt economy. For as long the economic policies serve foreign businesses and the local elite, for as long as corruption infests the bureaucracy, for as long as the people's rights and welfare remain as a least priority, the Filipino people shall always have a reason to protest and struggle for fundamental societal changes.



Source: [www.geocities.com/arkibongbayan](http://www.geocities.com/arkibongbayan)

## KAPALI T NG DOLYAR

Sa aking paglisan mula sa I nang-bayan  
Luha at dalamhati ang aking iniwan  
Sa mahal na pamilyang aking kinagisnan  
A ma't-ina, dalawang kabataan

Mabigat man ang dibdib sarili'y pilit inaliw  
Sa pag-asang buhayin mga iniwang gilwi  
K apalit ang dignidad ng isang taong Malaya  
A ko'y nagpaalipin sa dayuhang bansa

Sa Hong Kong napadpad ang abang sarili  
Di alam ang kultura ng daratnang lahi  
Wala naman kasing sinabi sa PDOS na ibinigay  
K aya't puso't diwa ay di mapalagay

Sa tindi ng takot, dibdib ay palaging kumakaba  
Baka magkamali sa trabahong ipinapagawa  
Lalo na't ngayon lang makahawak kaya namamangha  
P igereytor, markroweyb oben, makinang panlaba

Sa akin ipinaaruga isang taong gulang na bata  
Sing-edad ng iniwang anak sa aking I nay ipinaalaga  
Sa bawa't saglit mugto ang aking mga mata  
Singhaba ng oras daig ko pang nagpapanata

A ng kalendaryo'y naging sentro ng aking buhay  
Linggo't katapusan laging hinihintay  
Araw ng pahinga at araw ng sweldo  
Para sa pagod na katawan, remitans at utang sa bangko

Walong nakakainip na taon ang nakalipas  
A ko pa ri'y nandito at di makaalpas  
Mula sa pagpapaalila at pangungutang  
Sa aking balikat siya pa ring nakaatang

K ailan pa kaya ako makakauwi?  
I lang taon pa kayang sa pagpapaalila'y mananatili  
I niwang mga anak'y malalaki na  
Mahal na Ama'y pumanaw, I na nama'y ulyanin na

Hanggang kailan ang aking pagtitiis?  
K atawan at isip ay pagod nang labis  
A kin ngayong napatunayan na di ang pangingibang-bayan  
A ng syang solusyon sa aking aping kalagayan

Kung mag-isa ay hindi makakayang pasanin  
Suliraning pambansang nakadagan sa akin  
K ailangan kong makipagkaisa sa iba pang nangibang-bansa  
Nang sa aming pagkakaisa'y makakamit ang tunay na paglaya!

(cont'd from p. 2)

Based on my two experiences with the WSF I noticed that aside from being a global forum, the WSF was a huge market of ideas of people coming from different walks of life in search of new ideas, approaches and perspectives in addressing the different issues and concerns of people in different countries worldwide.

However, despite being diversified and providing an "open space", the WSF needs to serve a more solid and concrete common action to address the root causes of poverty, hunger, destruction of environment, conflicts and so forth.

Not only should this be reflected and developed in the different sessions but more so in the social forum itself. It should be more than an open space. I am not an expert on this kind of world forum but I feel the need for people to determine a clearer and more defined struggle and course of action.

Continuing such diversified character in a world full of conflicts needs to be reshaped and focused. The need to take a stand on major burning issues is necessary – issues such as the invasion of Iraq, the Palestinian question, forced migration, roots of conflicts, environmental concerns and the negative effects of globalization among the people, to name a few.

I also noticed that many sectoral and international grassroots formations were less represented in the WSF. I can only assume that it was because of financial constraints. But could it be also the WSF's lack of capacity to take up concrete positions on basic issues and concerns of the ordinary masses?

However virtuous our goals and actions may be, if the ordinary people, more often than not unrepresented in various institutions and NGOs, are not involved, all would be for naught, would it not?

## Announcement

### Conference on Foreign Brides

Tentative Date: May 2005

Shih Hsin University, Taipei, Taiwan ROC

## APMM NEWS Digest

is a publication of the *Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants (APMM)* - Research Documentation and Publication Program. Its office is located at:

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*This poem won the First Prize for the Poem Writing contest category of the Gawad Ka Amado Hernandez. The 2004 theme paid tribute to migrant workers.*