

OFW JOURNALISM CONSORTIUM

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At the service of overseas Filipino workers,
JEREMIAH M. OPINIANO
Project coordinator, OFW Journalism Consortium

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Candlelight Memorial inspires optimism, support for people living with HIV/AIDS

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human face of HIV/AIDS to help overcome the prevailing attitude of fear and prejudice directed toward its victims and replace it with compassion, humanity and sensitivity. **Paul Iszatt** of the Kapisanan ng mga Kamag-anak ng Migranteng Manggagawang Pilipino (Kakammpi) reports for the OFW Journalism Consortium.

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Filipino workers build detention cells Cuba

News of a clandestine and swift deployment of some 200 overseas Filipino workers to a United States Marine Facility in Cuba puzzled and intrigued Metro Manilans recently. The OFWs were reportedly whisked out of the country to the U.S. base in Guantanamo to build detention cells for suspected members of the terrorist Al Qaida group and the Taliban government captured in the joint US-British attack in Afghanistan last year. A source in the labor sector said the deployment was kept quiet because both the US and Philippine governments did not want the project to earn the ire and resentment of Filipino Muslims, whom the governments feared, would object to the idea of Filipinos building prisons for their brothers in faith Leny Zacarias reports for the OFW journalism Consortium.

(all reports were posted in CyberDyaryo [www.cyberdyaryo.com])

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Civil society on Senate passage of absentee voting bill: 'Elated but cautious'

by **JEREMIAH M. OPINIANO**

OFW Journalism Consortium

After jubilation rocked the Senate session hall on June 5 when 12 members of the so-called "new majority" passed Senate Bill 2104, or the Absentee Voting bill, on third reading, migrant groups and absentee voting advocates are guarded about the legal implications of the bill's controversial passage by the upper chamber.

At 5:31 pm on the second day of sessions held by the "new majority" senators after the Senate was adjourned *sine die* by Senate President Franklin Drilon, SB 2104 was "passed" on third and final reading. The passage of the absentee voting bill was the culmination of 15 years of lobbying by the OFW community.

"*Mamatay ako sa katuwaan* (I could die of happiness)," said advocacy officer Ellene Sana of the *Kapisanan ng mga Kamag-anak ng Migranteng Manggagawang Pilipino* (Kakammpi) moments after the bill was certified approved by the designated Senate President Pro Tempore, Blas Ople.

Prior to the approval, majority floor leader Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. said: "Economic role should have a corresponding political right. Overseas Filipinos have been asking for it (absentee voting) and are impatient to have it."

Jubilation in the gallery

Jubilation erupted in the gallery which was filled by members of migrant groups and absentee voting advocates such as Kakammpi, the Philippine Migrants' Rights Watch (PMRW), eLAGDA, eLAGDA-Riyadh chapter, OFWNet Foundation, the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN), the United Filipino Seafarers (UFS), and the OFW Congress in Riyadh. The advocates had feared that the bill's passage would be jeopardized by their support for the "legitimate", but absent, majority.

Notable in the gallery was the presence of officials and employees of the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA) of the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO), led by Undersecretary Merlin Magallona and CFO executive director Jose Molano.

Noel Esquela, executive director of eLAGDA (an online lobby group), Sana and the rest of the advocates said they are leaving it to the Supreme Court to decide on the legality of the passage of Senate Bill 2104.

On Tuesday, Senate President Franklin Drilon had said that bills passed during the "invalid and illegal" sessions chaired by Senator Blas Ople would be questioned in court. As of press time, the camp of Drilon had yet to release any statement on the passage of SB 2104.

Hope for the best

"Our consolation is that *kahit papaano, nakatikim man lang tayo ng* (in whatever manner, we managed to get) approval on second reading, and that would have been good enough. But no, we even glimpsed success on third reading in the Senate, even if under a legal shadow of doubt. We'll let the legals deal with the legalities and hope for the best," Esquela said.

For her part, Sana finds Drilon's plans to question the passage "uncalled for", since he and the other senators staunchly supported the measure, and were with the opposition senators in crafting favorable provisions in the bill.

"We beat the (June 6) deadline," Sen. Edgardo Angara, chairman of the Committee on Constitutional Amendments and Revision of Codes and Laws, told Sana and the other advocates outside the session hall. Angara said it was unfortunate the other senators were not present to witness the "historic" event.

Still, the Congress as a whole, which includes the House of Representatives, passed the absentee voting bill only on installment. The Commission on Elections (Comelec) had given Congress a June 6 deadline to pass the bill to allow the agency ample time to prepare for its implementation in the 2004 national elections.

Advocates had hoped to have the bill passed by both chambers by June 6 and have President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo sign it into law today, June 7, National Migrants' Day.

Battle shifts to lower chamber

The battle now shifts to the lower chamber, where Speaker Jose de Venecia adjourned the session on June 4 in sympathy with Drilon and his group. Like in the Senate, opposition congressmen convened a "session" attended by 19 members of the minority, outside the plenary hall. But even when the regular session was still ongoing, the House encountered difficulty convening a quorum for House Bill 3570, when deliberations on second reading ended in November 2001.

The House passed absentee-voting bills during the eighth, ninth and tenth sessions of Congress, but the bill was not acted upon during the 11th Congress because of the impeachment case against then-President Joseph Estrada.

Congress resumes session on July 22, when President Arroyo delivers her second State-of-the-Nation Address (SONA) before a joint session. In last year's SONA, the President certified the absentee-voting bill as urgent.

For Sana, an experienced lobbyist who has frequented the halls of Congress to push for the passage of the absentee voting bill since the 1990s, the June 5 approval by the Senate's "new majority" represented the victory of all absentee-voting lobbyists and overseas Filipinos.

"As far as we are concerned, we truly experienced the hardships of lobbying (for this absentee- voting bill) and we are happy for its passage," she said.

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DFA, DoF still working out specs

\$250M Japanese OFW bond launch postponed

by **VILLY G. CABUAG**

OFW Journalism Consortium

The planned issuance of US\$250 million worth of bonds by the Philippine government, to be offered to overseas Filipino workers in Japan, has been postponed--perhaps to the end of the year--after misunderstandings arose among the government agencies involved about its specifications and where the proceeds should go.

According to the Bureau of the Treasury, it is impossible to launch the bonds this month as promised by Vice-President and Foreign Affairs Secretary Teofisto Guingona to the migrant workers in Japan last year. Guingona made the announcement after consultations with various lobby groups in Japan, composed mostly of Filipinos, on the bond float when he visited Tokyo in November 2001.

At the time, he said, the buyers of the bonds would also be provided benefits such as health and accident insurance, and a weekly lottery with a top prize of \$10,000, among others. These bonds were to be offered in minimum denominations of \$100, so as to make them attractive to individual retail buyers.

Japan-based Marian Chiquette Tanizaki, president of Kapisanan ng Migranteng Filipino (KMF), a network of organizations dealing with migrant workers, said her organization has been conducting an information campaign regarding the bond float among their fellow Filipino workers in Tokyo, and in nearby Osaka, where there are an estimated 160,000 OFWs.

"We knew it is going to be floated in early June based on our discussion with the DFA. That's why we were hurrying up on our educational campaign for OFWs there," Tanizaki said after learning about the delay in the issuance of the bonds.

"Many have been anticipating it because what they (OFWs) are attracted to the most are the benefits and the huge savings. But I think it (the delay) won't be a problem--the more time we have, the better," she said during a visit to Manila last month.

She said the KMF has been lobbying with the Philippine government for the issuance of OFW bonds for sometime now to encourage migrants, especially undocumented workers, to save. The retail bonds were originally conceptualized during the Aquino administration, when the late Raul Manglapus was foreign affairs secretary.

Tanizaki and her group have been campaigning for the bonds on the basis of a three-year maturity period with a four-percent interest rate per year, without realizing that some government agencies are still squabbling over these and other details.

No coordination with DoF

Apparently, Vice-President Guingona made the announcement about the details of the bonds without coordinating with the Department of Finance (DoF).

"After the announcement, I asked (National Treasurer of the Philippines) Mr. (Sergio) Edeza if he was asked by Guingona about the insurance and lottery aspects of the bonds, and he said no," a finance official said. "Administratively what he (Guingona) announced was too costly for us (DoF). We just have to make the most out of it."

Guingona's announcement also created some misunderstandings among other government agencies. The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), for instance, commented that the promised benefits attached to the bonds would exceed the target 25-percent administration cost.

"The possibility is that only a few OFWs have the capability to purchase these bonds and if they would, (they can only) purchase more than one bond certificate. Confusion will then arise on the valuation of the amount of accidental, health benefits ... if something happens to the OFWs who were issued this bond certificate," the OWWA said in a comment submitted to the Department of Labor and Employment dated December 10, 2001.

It therefore recommended a thorough study of the matter before the actual flotation, and an intensive information dissemination campaign in the target Filipino community abroad.

Treasury also skeptical

The Treasury office, the agency in charge of the bond float, is also skeptical. Deputy Treasurer Mina Figueroa explained that upon maturity of the bond, the underwriters would have to pay each holder individually. Government will also have to shoulder the cost of the roadshow upon its launch.

If government floats \$250 million, all of which is purchased at the minimum price of \$100 each, the banks would have to pay at least 2.5 million OFW bond holders. "I don't think they (banks) would give it for free. But we want their commitment on this matter, among other things," said Figueroa, who is handling the underwriters' proposals.

She said the Treasury still has to reconcile the terms submitted by the underwriters—the Hong Kong Shanghai Banking Corporation, Land Bank of the Philippines and First Metro Investment Corporation.

HSBC will lead the team for the bond float, the state-owned Land Bank will provide the network in the provinces and in Tokyo where it has a branch, while First Metro, an affiliate of Metrobank which also has a branch in the Japanese capital, will handle the insurance coverage which will be coursed through its sister firm, Philippine Axa Life.

But what the Bureau of the Treasury fears the most is Guingona's promise of a \$10,000-week lottery, as a come-on for the OFWs to invest in the bonds.

"It's not an issue (with the underwriters) at this point. But I know we will come to that later. What if after two months of issuance, only a few people purchase the bonds and most of it is stuck in the bank? Who will shoulder the cost?" Figueroa asked.

Government could totally scrap the lottery, or institute safeguards in case the available bonds are not bought.

Initial commitment low

In theory, the 250,000-strong Filipino OFW contingent in Japan can purchase the bonds. Studies show that Filipino workers in Japan have money for investment, partly because many Filipinos are married to Japanese.

According to KMF statistics, there are about 80,000 Filipinos married to Japanese, 140,000 to 160,000 are entertainers and undocumented workers, and some 10,000 to 15,000 are trainees, professionals and tourists.

But, Figueroa pointed out, at the launch, the Filipino community only committed \$200,000, eight-tenths of 1 percent of the total value of the OFW bonds. This means a roadshow will have to be mounted to accompany the bond float and ensure its success. And OFWs in other countries may have to be allowed to purchase the bonds if the issuance fails in Japan.

"But we cannot just offer bonds in other countries. We may be breaking their regulations. And we will need a permit for such," Figueroa said. In Japan, government plans to course the bonds through the Philippine Embassy, directly to the Filipino communities there, or to the branches of the underwriters.

But the non-government groups in Japan are careful not to give the floatation any media mileage because the Japanese authorities might tax them heavily.

Government is still testing if it can tap the earnings of migrant workers on top of their annual remittances. If successful, the funds raised from the bond float will be added to the planned \$1.4-billion in government borrowings this year to contain the budget deficit within the target of P130 billion.

Confusion over destination of bond float proceeds

Confusion on where the bond float proceeds will go can also affect its success. Many government agencies, including the OWWA and DFA, as well as migrant groups, expect the fund to go to projects specifically for OFWs. But in theory, funds from any DoF-issued bonds go directly to the national government or the Department of Budget and Management to be allocated to the different agencies.

"We would not let them pay the (government) debts using our money," said Tanizaki, who is married to a Japanese, and who has been working full-time in an NGO for the empowerment of Filipino workers.

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OFWs most vulnerable group

Candlelight Memorial inspires optimism, support for people living with HIV/AIDS

by **PAUL ISZATT**
OFW Journalism Consortium

People living and with HIV/AIDS and those who have died from this deadly virus were the focus of the 19th Candlelight Memorial held on May 17 at the Greenhills Shopping Center in San Juan.

Sponsored by the Aids Society of the Philippines (ASP), the Ford Foundation, and Levi Strauss Philippines, Inc., the theme of the event was "Share Your Vision for a Brighter Tomorrow".

The event was meant to present to the public the human face of HIV/AIDS to help overcome the prevailing attitude of fear and prejudice directed toward its victims and replace it with compassion, humanity and sensitivity.

According to Dr. Ric Matteo of the Department of Health, the memorial was, "more than anything else, a good advocacy tool with which to drum up support for HIV prevention and control."

Children's workshop

It began with a workshop for children held in Don Henrico's restaurant, aimed at encouraging youngsters to adopt a more humane and positive attitude toward people with HIV/AIDS. The workshop, held from nine in the morning till four in the afternoon was organized by the Probe Media Foundation, Inc to enable the children to interpret the meaning of the Candlelight Memorial, and to incorporate this in their art work, like masks, book illustrations and drawings.

At five pm, the young workshop participants, together with their parents and guardians, walked the short distance to Country Waffles Restaurant where Quezon City Mayor Feliciano Belmonte officially opened a photo exhibit entitled "Positive Lives", that captured stark and powerful images of individuals living with HIV/AIDS.

Later in the evening, two individuals living with HIV/AIDS, Jack and Au Reyes shared their thoughts and feelings about their life with the virus, providing the audience a very intimate human perspective of the disease.

HIV is a reality

Dr. Ric Matteo of the National Epidemiological Center at the Department of Health said that an outreach activity such as this "...makes us aware that there are already a lot of people who have died from AIDS".

He added, "We in the Philippines do not see and do not get the news of people living with HIV/AIDS that often. The majority of people in the Philippines do not know people who have HIV/AIDS." Therefore, "...events like the 19th Candlelight Memorial drum up the fact that HIV is a reality, and is not an issue that has been invented to scare us and that will not effect us."

Dr. Matteo works with the DoH's Aids Surveillance and Education Project (ASEP) funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Health Organization (WHO). He explained that ASEP, "monitors the intensity/prevalence of STDs including HIV among high-risk groups ... all over the Philippines" and is responsible for maintaining the Aids Registry.

Dr Matteo disclosed that 25 % of people reported to the Department of Health as HIV positive are Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). OFWs, especially those working as seamen, are particularly vulnerable to the threat of HIV/AIDS, he said. And yet, OFWs are " a notable absence" from the ASEP. Dr. Matteo said, "At present, they (ASEP) do not have a method on how to carry out the surveillance of OFWs."

There is therefore a clear and present need to extend the HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and outreach programs to include those Filipinos living and working overseas, he said. Living abroad away from their families, OFWs face unique pressures that can lead to indulgence in high-risk behavior that dramatically increases their chance of acquiring HIV/AIDS.

Three factors

According to Dr. Matteo, three factors lead to this increased threat of contracting HIV/AIDS: "...they may suffer from extreme loneliness when they are living far from home, they have a greater disposable income, and they become braver when they are out of the Philippines."

Dr Matteo said that in response to the increased risk of HIV infection faced by OFWs, seamen in particular, and in an effort to accurately monitor the rate of infection and develop an effective awareness campaign, the ASEP will soon begin serological tests on returning seamen.

As part of the observance of the 19th Candlelight Memorial, certificates were awarded to the winners of the art workshop. In his keynote speech, Mayor Belmonte reaffirmed the commitment of his administration to implement a proactive policy to promote HIV/AIDS awareness within schools and the community by supporting outreach programs organized and facilitated by civil society organizations.

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Swift processing, high pay

Filipino workers build detention cells Cuba

by **LENY ZACARIAS**

OFW Journalism Consortium

News of a clandestine and swift deployment of some 200 overseas Filipino workers to a United States Marine Facility in Cuba puzzled and intrigued Metro Manilans recently.

The OFWs were reportedly whisked out of the country to the U.S. base in Guantanamo to build detention cells for suspected members of the terrorist Al Qaida group and the Taliban government captured in the joint US-British attack in Afghanistan last year.

A source in the labor sector said the deployment was kept quiet because both the US and Philippine governments did not want the project to earn the ire and resentment of Filipino Muslims, whom the governments feared, would object to the idea of Filipinos building prisons for their brothers in faith.

Representatives from Brown and Root, an international construction company, arrived in the country on March 17, a Sunday, to recruit Filipino workers for the project. The following morning, they met with Undersecretary Manuel Imson of the Department of Labor and Employment (DoLE) to explain their request for 200 Filipino construction workers.

In the afternoon, they proceeded to the office of Administrator Rosalinda Baldoz of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to solicit her assistance.

Suspicious

"At first, Baldoz was suspicious because there had been countless times when someone, claiming to have the backing of a top DoLE official, would request to speed up the processing of an overseas worker," the source said.

But Ms. Baldoz was convinced by a call from the US State Department and the Philippine Embassy in Washington confirming the job order. In fact, the initial demand was for 400 workers, but so far, only 200 workers have been sent to Cuba. Almost all of those recruited are from Batangas.

"I heard that their mobilization was very fast," said the source. When the local recruiter, AngloEuropean Service, interviewed candidates, they also took their body measurements. Each recruit was furnished with basic personal construction tools and two sets of overalls with matching boots and caps.

By Friday, March 22, only five days after Brown and Root arrived in Manila, the workers had been processed, they had their working visas for the United States, and were ready to leave

Milkfish and junkfood

But their flight was postponed for two days as the charter plane to take them to the job arrived on Saturday and the pilots rested on Sunday. Since there was still room in the plane's cargo hold, AngloEuropean ordered a ton of milkfish from Saranggani Bay and other food supplies such as noodles, seasonings and junk food to be loaded into the aircraft..

What normally takes two to three months of preparation was accomplished by Brown and Root and AngloEuropean in a week. Labor secretary Patricia Sto. Tomas denied that anyone got special treatment in processing the papers of workers deployed in Cuba. She asserted that AngloEuropean Service went through the proper channels in documenting the workers prior to departure. The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) can actually process documents of workers within 72 hours provided they submit all requirements, Sto Tomas said.

The men have short-term contracts for two months during which time they receive food rations, overtime pay, medical, accidental and death insurance. The US employer, Brown and Root, has also arranged for the installation of a telephone line inside the base for the workers to be in touch with their loved ones in the Philippines.

A truly good deal

"Actually, the deal is so good that my husband told me many of the workers are willing to extend their stay in Cuba," said Dina, whose husband Jojo is in Cuba with the group. He is due to return home anytime in May. The local recruiter, Anglo European Service, promised Jojo a salary of \$900, or P45,000, a month.

Jojo, who was once employed as a mechanic in Dubai, is commissioned as a finishing carpenter in Cuba.

For years, AngloEuropean had been supplying US military bases with Filipino construction workers, but it is only now that the activity has caught the nation's attention. AngloEuropean, the first recruitment agency in the country, has been in the recruiting business for 30 years. During the civil war in Somalia in the 1990s, the US government hired Filipino workers and brought them to Somalia to build a canteen for the soldiers.

The success of the Cuba deployment has prompted the Department of Labor and Employment to include it in its marketing mission to achieve President Arroyo's target to raise one million jobs.

DoLE Undersecretary Manuel Imson has recently returned from a mission in the United States where he met with representatives of the US State Department, the Defense Department and the Pentagon.