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Of Trees and Forest

Mixed Christmas

MANILA, Philippines — Four days from today, we will celebrate Christmas Day, probably the happiest holiday for most Filipinos.

But not for our 10 million overseas Filipino workers (OFW) and their families, for whom Christmas may be one of their loneliest moments.

Thousands of our countrymen still go abroad to work, even in dangerous places, so they can provide their families with a comfortable life and a better future. Sadly, they find no job opportunities in their home country.

Overseas jobs are often an irresistible temptation to those who wish their children will have a better life than their parents. Many have succeeded, and their families now live in their own decent homes, the children attend good schools, and the future looks good.

Come Christmas Day – the loneliness that it brings to the OFW, thousands of miles away from his family, is the price he and his family pays for the comfort that working abroad brings. That loneliness cannot be quantified in dollars and cents.

Back home, let us also not forget the poor among us. For every family that will happily celebrates Christmas this Sunday, many more families will be bitter.

We often see the festivities, the bright lights, the parties, the crowded shopping malls days, even weeks, before Christmas and even after, when people start to spend the gift checks and bonuses they receive.

But what we have here is really a Christmas filled with mixed realities. Outside an expensive restaurant where a family feasts on a special dinner are envious children in tattered clothes; below the bridge, over which the luxury car passes to take a family to a high-end shopping mall, is a family making the best of a meal of leftover spaghetti and burgers salvaged from the trash cans or simply thrown out the car window by a spoiled rich man's kid.

This is also the time when the wide gap between the haves and the have-nots among us is highlighted, when the deprivations of poverty is really felt, and when the misfortune in life comes to fore. This is the time when many people ask: where is justice in this world?

We can take a pause and wish that poverty, which is also the reason behind the large OFW population, will simply and quickly disappear, so that all families can live together happily and comfortably.

That is, of course, wishful thinking. In my view, Christmas Day highlights the need for all of us to confront the problem of poverty as a nation. And we are seeing good things happening. The government is doing what it can to attract investments, encourage business activities, and generate employment.

Many Filipinos, including former OFWS or the families of OFWS, are becoming entrepreneurs, setting up small businesses, and in the process providing jobs to other people.

The state of the economy also adds to the urgency of addressing the poverty problem.

Christmas Day 2011 comes as the economy fails to reach the official growth target, which started at 7 to 8 percent, and is now forecast to end at 4 percent or lower in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a big drop from 7.3 percent in 2010.

Given the mixed nature of Christmas in our country, let us be one in hoping that the holiday will usher in real progress in solving our nation's ills, primarily poverty.

Nevertheless, let me take this opportunity to greet everybody a Merry Christmas!

(Please send comments to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com)

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