

Column for Manila Bulletin
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Of Trees and Forest

Syria won't be the last

MANILA, Philippines — The worsening situation in Syria has prompted me to again call for the designation of a Cabinet-level agency exclusively for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and their families.

As I had emphasized earlier, their numbers alone – about 50 million (ten million OFWs with an average of five family members each) – make them a large enough constituency for an executive department.

If this cannot be done immediately, then the government should form an agency, initially with a skeleton staff, but with authority to draw from the resources of other agencies to finance, for instance, the repatriation of OFWs in conflict areas, beginning with Syria, now the focus of international attention.

Syria, which gained independence from the French in April, 1946, has been under constant internal conflict, with military coups and coup attempts a few years after independence until 1971, and under an emergency rule from 1963 to the present.

Massive protests were launched last year as part of Arab Spring, which continues today. The United Nations, which tallied the death toll at 5,400 as of December, 2011, has stopped counting because of the difficulty of getting information.

The good news is that, as of the first week of February, 2012, no Filipino has been killed in the deadly crackdown on protests by Syrian security forces.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said it had repatriated a total of 771 OFWs out of the 10,000 (migrant groups estimate the number at 17,000) OFWs in Syria, with help from the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration. Last month, the DFA raised the crisis alert level in Syria from 3 to 4 in view of the escalating violence in Syria. Under level 4, mandatory or forced evacuation of OFWs at government expense will be implemented.

Syria is only the latest, and will most probably not the last country where OFWs will have to be repatriated once conflict arises.

The Arab Spring, which had earlier hit other countries in the Middle East and North Africa, had prompted the repatriation of thousands of OFWs from Egypt, Lebanon, and Libya. Last February 1, the DFA announced it placed Iraq under alert level 3, which encourages voluntary repatriation at government expense, while at the same time imposing an automatic ban on the deployment of Filipino workers in that country.

The DFA explained that the alert level stemmed from the "higher-than-expected surge in terrorist and sectarian violence" in Iraq after the withdrawal of American troops in December, 2011.

I appreciate the efforts being taken by the DFA which, in the absence of an OFW-dedicated department, is leading the repatriation of OFWs from conflict areas. The DFA said it had fielded more people from Philippine embassies in nearby countries like

Lebanon, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to help in the processing and repatriation of OFWs from Syria.

However, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the DFA has other mandates, principally to establish, develop, and promote diplomatic and economic ties between the Philippines and other countries. The repatriation of OFWs became a more significant concern only when the Arab Spring erupted, and precisely because no other department was in place to take care of Filipino workers overseas.

In my view, this underscores the need to designate, if not create, a Cabinet-level agency that will look after the interests of OFWs whether there are crises or none.

By this time, we should have gained enough knowledge and experience in implementing efficient and timely repatriation of OFWs when trouble erupts in their host countries.

As I had said earlier, designating an agency or an interim group with a skeleton staff but with authority to draw funds from existing agencies should be a good start, while the government considers my proposal for an executive department for OFWs.

We have to be ready. While we try to take OFWs out of Syria, we should be preparing for the next emergency that will require immediate repatriation, for the sake of our OFWs and their loved ones. And, for the sake of our economy, which draws a lifeline from OFW remittances.

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

LINK:

<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/351389/syria-wont-be-last>