

Column for Manila Bulletin
MANNY VILLAR
August 30, 2011

Of Trees and Forest

O.F.W.S should be top priority (Part 2 of a series)

Several recent and ongoing developments in the world have prodded me to look at our foreign policy, particularly the priorities being followed by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA).

First, the “Arab Spring,” the wave of demonstrations and protests in the Arab world that started with the revolution in Tunisia last December 2010. It was quickly followed by protests in Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen, and more recently in Libya and Syria.

Second, the massive disasters, earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown, that all hit Japan in March, 2011. Japan is home to more than 300,000 Filipinos.

And third, the numerous cases of exploitation and abuses that overseas Filipino workers suffered and continue to suffer in their host countries, not only at the hands of employers, recruiters, but in some cases also in the hands of Philippine government officials stationed in those countries.

The unrest in the Middle East and North Africa and the disasters in Japan made the DFA one of the most active departments in government, as it led efforts to look at the conditions of more than a million OFWs in these areas and to repatriate, with help from international organizations, those whose lives were endangered.

Before all this, the DFA found itself in the limelight when China executed three Filipinos who had been convicted for smuggling drugs into China.

Except for these instances, and in other countries that host large numbers of OFWs, Philippine consulates and embassies participated in international or bilateral conferences, presented position papers and issued communiqués on global issues. But I doubt that other countries even paid attention to what our diplomats were doing.

In its web site, the Department of Foreign Affairs cited the provisions of the 1987 Constitution pertaining to our foreign policy, in particular Article II, Section 7, which states that the paramount consideration in the Philippines’ relations with other countries “shall be national sovereignty, territorial integrity, national interest, and the right to self-determination.”

I would like to believe that the phrase “national interest” includes the interests of the ten million Filipinos working in many countries of the world.

The DFA web site also listed the three pillars of our foreign policy, as provided under Republic Act No. 7157 (Philippine Foreign Service Act of 1991), namely, preservation and enhancement of national security; promotion and attainment of economic security; and protection of the rights and promotion of the welfare and interest of Filipinos overseas.

In my view, our diplomats should focus more in improving relations with countries where millions of OFWs are located so that they can persuade these countries to come out with laws that will protect our fellow Filipinos, so that they can enjoy the same benefits as their own citizens, at least in terms of labor protection.

This should be on top of the DFA's list of priorities. Pursuing this direction may require top-level dialogue between government officials from the Philippines and the host countries of OFWs.

Let me cite just two cases in point: the so-called "Saudization scheme" in Saudi Arabia and the status of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. Under that "Saudization scheme," at least 10 percent of the employees of private companies in Saudi Arabia, which hosts more than a million OFWs, must be Saudi locals.

Labor and Employment Secretary Rosalinda Baldoz has estimated the number of OFWs, who may lose their jobs as a result of that "Saudization scheme," at 20,000 to 50,000.

In Hong Kong, a Filipina domestic helper has filed a case in court questioning Hong Kong's Basic Law, which excludes domestic workers from foreigners who may be granted permanent residency after seven years of continuous stay in the former British colony. Majority of the more than 250,000 domestic workers in Hong Kong are Filipinos.

These are just two cases where the DFA can play a significant role in line with the third pillar of our foreign policy. I just hope that being third does not mean that protecting the rights and promoting the welfare and interests of OFWs is the least among those pillars.

(For feedback: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com)

LINK:

<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/332612/ofws-should-be-top-priority-part-2-a-series>