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Of Trees and Forest

Why a department of OFW's

MANILA, Philippines — Last month, the remains of an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) arrived in Manila and official reports declared her death a year ago in Saudi Arabia as a suicide. But, when the body was embalmed, the family learned that some of her internal organs were missing.

In March of this year, three OFWs were executed in China for drug smuggling. News reports, citing government data, said about 500 other Filipinos were languishing in various jails abroad for drug-related crimes and that there thousands more for other offenses.

Some people may say that the number of OFWs in jails in other countries is just a small part of the 10 million Filipinos working and living abroad. And they may treat my proposal for an executive department to handle OFW issues as nothing more than an emotional appeal.

I disagree. There are other factors which have prompted me to propose a Cabinet-level agency to handle OFW affairs.

Why, in the first place, do we have three press secretaries with Cabinet rank but we cannot have one for OFWs? I am not even asking for an increase in the number of the departments in the Executive Branch. What I am proposing is a re-prioritization, because many decades ago, when the departments were being organized, there were only a few Filipinos working abroad. The term overseas Filipino worker came later.

Now, setting aside the emotional or social concerns regarding OFWs and their families, let's talk about the country's economy and the role that OFWs play in its growth.

Our economy received more than \$18 billion in remittances from OFWs last year, notwithstanding the conflicts in the Middle East, the disasters in Japan and the economic problems of the US and Europe.

According to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, remittances for the eight months to August this year totaled \$13.02 billion, up 6.9 percent from the same period last year. Last August alone, the remittances amounted to \$1.67 billion, up 11.1 percent from \$1.5 billion in the same month last year. This was the fastest pace of growth in 18 months.

The BSP said it expected OFW remittances, which fuel domestic consumption and support the peso and the balance of payments, to grow by 7 percent this year despite the anticipated slowdown in overall economic growth.

These OFW remittances are in cold cash, not loans that need government debt service. On the other hand, we got less than \$2 billion in foreign direct investments last year, and we'll be lucky to get more this year given the slump in the global economy.

We have a growing tourism industry, but it is beaten by OFWs for which we should have an executive department, from a purely financial point of view.

As I have said we have 10 million OFWs. On the other hand, we got about three million tourists a year. OFWs also beat the information and communications technology (ICT), which has been taken out of the Department of Transportation and Communications, in line with proposals for its elevation into a department level.

I'm not against having departments for tourism and ICT because we need to promote these industries, too. But I firmly believe that OFWs deserve no less better treatment considering their contributions to the economy.

Less we forget, the remittances from OFWs saved our economy from collapse not once but several times, from the first oil crisis in the seventies, the debt moratorium in the early eighties, the Asian financial crisis in 1997 to the global crisis in 2008.

About two-thirds of the world, including the United States and Japan, went into recession in 2009, and yet the Philippines managed to grow about 1% because the OFWs kept on sending precious dollars home which fueled consumption.

In fact, the remittances continue to drive the growth of the retailing, services and real estate industries and allied businesses. The remittances are also the main reason why the Philippine peso has remained strong in the currency markets.

Clearly, right now the single biggest thing going for our country is our OFWs.

With the growing fears that the global economy may enter another period of recession, our economy will continue to rely on the remittances of our OFWs to keep it afloat and, hopefully, sustain growth.

Viewed from any perspective, our OFWs deserve a Cabinet-level secretary to look after their interests.

Perhaps, some agencies, or even a department, may be dissolved to make way for a department for OFWs, our modern-day heroes.

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<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/338975/why-a-department-ofws>