

**Column for Manila Bulletin**  
**MANNY VILLAR**  
**September 6, 2011**

## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **Why not and O.F.W. Dep't? (Last of a three-part series)**

IN the first installment of this three-part series, I discussed the big role that overseas Filipino workers played in the life of our nation: How they have saved the economy from collapse during national and global crises, how they have prevented the unemployment problem from exploding into unimaginable proportions, and how they have fueled the boom in the property and retailing sectors and in other industries.

In the second installment, I noted the many challenges that OFWs faced, including their working and living conditions. And I called on the Department of Foreign Affairs to make OFWs the top priority in establishing and cultivating ties with other countries.

This three-part series is about the great disparity between the OFWs' contributions to the nation and the amount of attention they receive from their government. They have given so much to their country; yet we have given them so little.

I call this an injustice! We talk of social justice in this country, but, I am sorry to say, we don't pay enough attention to the social and human rights of OFWs.

Why? Is it because the majority of OFWs come from the ranks of the poor? Is it because OFWs have been synonymous with domestic workers and have become an embarrassment to their more fortunate countrymen?

I hope not. OFWs have to be admired because they have taken great risks to go abroad because their families have nothing to eat and their children cannot afford to attend school. They have suffered the pain of separation from their families and the abuses of cruel employers so they may secure a better future for their loved ones.

Given their sacrifices, it is difficult to imagine the anguish of thousands of OFWs who were displaced by the turmoil in the Middle East and North Africa, or the recession in the United States, or even the disasters in Japan. But it is not difficult to understand why many refuse to leave Libya or Syria and other areas of conflict. They fear losing their jobs and jeopardizing their families' needs.

I strongly believe it is time for us to give enough recognition to our OFWs. Buying plane tickets or sending ships to return them home when trouble erupts in their host countries is all right as an emergency measure, but it doesn't go further than that.

The welfare and social security needs of OFWs are supposed to be handled by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, repatriation and other interests are taken

care of by the Department of Foreign Affairs, and other needs are supposed to be provided by the Department of Labor and Employment.

They deserve more! The government must put in place a legal service that will provide counsel or defense to OFWs who get in trouble in their host countries. And we must also assume that a certain percentage of workers deployed abroad will encounter problems and they will need or want to come home. It should not be viewed as an unusual or a one-time thing.

Based on this determination, the government should set up a fund to support a systematic repatriation. In this way, OFWs who want to come home but have no money will not have to languish in Philippine consulates or friends' homes while waiting for kind donors.

So, providing legal assistance and systematic repatriation, as well as other services to OFWs will require one agency or department dedicated to them, a whole department that will protect them and promote their interests and help them secure a better life for their families when they stop working overseas.

Am I proposing that we add a new department in the Executive Branch? No, I am not. But I am proposing a review of the existing departments and agencies to find out which are still relevant and which can be retired. I believe that when we do this, the OFWs will have their own department.

A department for OFWs will be able to consolidate government functions related to OFW interests, which are currently being handled by different agencies.

Thus, looking after the welfare of OFWs, our living heroes, supporting their families and helping them secure a better future for their loved ones will be done in an efficient and responsible manner.

The ten million overseas Filipino workers deserve nothing less than all this!

(Feedback: [mbv\\_secretariat@yahoo.com](mailto:mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com))