

Office of Sen. Manny Villar

Sagip-OFW Helpline

Ground Floor, Worldwide Corporate Center Bldg., Shaw Blvd., Mandaluyong City
☎09174226800 and 09175050639 ● mannyvillar_sagipofw@yahoo.com

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Villar urges DOLE, OWWA to act swiftly on complaints of OFWs vs abusive welfare officer in Jordan

Senator Manny Villar urged the Department of Labor and Employment and Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration to act swiftly on the complaints of five overseas Filipino workers against a welfare officer based in Ammam, Jordan who wanted to force them to go back to work despite having escaped from abusive employers.

Villar met the five repatriated women workers in his office and upon hearing their stories, immediately instructed Atty. Charles Parcia to help them execute sworn affidavits against Welfare Officer Carmelita Mag-uyon. Villar came to know about the plight of the five OFWs through DZXL Tatak RMN's Bantay OFW program as well as through the Blas F. Ople Policy Center.

"These women came to the Philippine Embassy's Bahay-Kalinga as victims of physical and verbal abuse. It is ironic that instead of providing compassionate services, they were allegedly subjected to even more verbal abuse by a welfare officer," Villar added.

The five workers, namely, Raquel Aragon, Lolita Wadia, Noraida Guiamilil, Jhona Mortel and Genevieve Quibedo, told the senator that they were shouted at by Welfare Officer Mag-uyon whenever they sought her attention or asked questions about their respective cases.

In her affidavit, Noraida claimed that when she approached the welfare officer to seek a medical examination due to a contagious illness, the latter shouted at her and replied, "paano ka nga magpa-medical, wala ka ngang passport!" ("How can you have a medical exam when you don't have a passport!")

Another OFW, Johna Mortel, tried to seek Mag-uyon's help via SMS when she suffered physical abuse in the hands of Jordanian police and her employer while they were forcing her to ride in her employer's car. In fear of her life and no longer able to wait for a response from Mag-uyon, she texted DZXL's staff named Larry King who promptly notified the Philippine Overseas Labor Office or POLO in Ammam, Jordan about Mortel's situation. This did not sit well with Mag-uyon who upon arrival at the police station berated Mortel and other Filipinos under custody: "Bakit kayo nagtext sa Pilipinas, nauuna pa yung balita, tingnan mo ang nangyayari saiyo napapahamak ka!" ("Why do you send messages to the Philippines, the media is first to get the information, and so look at what happened, you got harmed!")

Mortel further wrote in her affidavit: "Sometime in May 2011, Welfare Officer Mag-uyon asked me if I have five thousand dollars to pay my employer for the cost of my deployment because I can only go home once I paid said amount."

According to Senator Villar, these first-hand experiences of distressed workers underscore the need to review the selection process for government employees who would be assigned abroad to look after OFWs.

Majority of the complainants said that the welfare officer would often advise abused women who have sought refuge at Bahay-Kalinga to go back to work.

Raquel Aragon, one of the complainants, recalled that the welfare officer even tried to facilitate her return to an abusive employer to the point of acting as a go-between for the agency and her family in order to persuade Raquel to change her mind.

“While at the center I sought the aid of Welfare Officer Carmelita Mag-uyon who refused to render any assistance but instead told me to return to my employer as she feels that is what is best under the circumstances,” Aragon wrote in her affidavit.

“Let’s send people to the frontlines overseas with excellent people skills and with proper training on counseling and proper welfare assistance,” Villar stressed, adding that the welfare officer being charged by the OFW complainants appears not to have the heart or patience for the job.

According to the Blas F. Ople Center, they are expecting more OFWs from Jordan to file individual affidavits of complaints against Welfare Officer Carmelita Mag-uyon.

Former labor undersecretary Susan Ople who heads the Center said that the five women were emboldened to pursue their complaints after they were informed of their rights under the law by the senator’s legal team.

As Welfare Officer under the Omnibus Rules and Regulations Implementing Republic Act No. 8042 otherwise known as the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995, Carmelita Mag-uyon should have performed the following role:

Section 51. Role of OWWA – The Welfare Officer, or in his/her absence, the Center Coordinator of the Filipino Welfare Resource Center, shall make proper representations with the employer/principal and/or agency as the case may be, through conciliation meetings or conferences for the purpose of enforcing contractual obligations concerning migrant workers. For this purpose, the officer may enlist the assistance of the OWWA Home Office.”

Ople said that the Welfare Officer should not force distressed workers who have sought refuge at the Bahay-Kalinga in Ammam, Jordan to go back to work and/or shoulder the deployment costs of their employer.

“Many of these women are victims of forced labor trafficking, and as such, their rights should have been defended,” Ople explained.

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