

Office of Sen. Manny Villar

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Villar seeks POEA crackdown VS "passport hostage-takers"

Senator Manny Villar called on the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) to crack down on licensed recruitment agencies that demand money in exchange for the retrieval of passports and other documents by job applicants.

The pro-OFW legislator said that his office has received reports about certain licensed agencies that withhold their passports and refuse to return them despite several months of waiting for their deployment to push through.

"I urge the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration to immediately investigate the "passport hostage-taking scheme" of some licensed agencies," Villar stressed.

The senator pointed out that under Republic Act No. 10022 which amended the Migrant Workers Act of 1995, a licensed recruitment agency is guilty of illegal recruitment when it withholds or denies travel documents from applicant workers before departure for monetary or financial considerations. An agency's failure to deploy a contracted worker without valid reason is also considered an act of illegal recruitment.

"It is unfortunate that while we have OFWs being held hostage in Somalia by pirates, here in the Philippines we have job applicants whose passports are being held hostage by their own recruiters," Villar added. In one case that was brought to the attention of "Bantay OFW", a public service program on DZXL, a job applicant was being forced to pay Php 12,000 in exchange for the return of his passport after the said applicant decided not to push through with his deployment. Said applicant changed his mind after being asked by the licensed agency to sign a waiver stating that the OFW will bear all the blame in case he decides to terminate his contract prior to expiration. After the complaint was aired on radio, the agency decided to simply turn over the passport to its owner.

The senator called on job applicants who became victims of such "passports-held-hostage" schemes to immediately report such violations to the POEA. A jail term from 12 to 20 years await convicted illegal recruiters.

"Passport hostage-takers within the recruitment industry must be penalized because they are out to profit from their own inability to deploy the job applicant," Villar said. The senator noted that the passport in the name of its holder is actually a property of the Philippine government, and not of any private entity.

The senator also called on the POEA to cleanse the recruitment industry of undesirable agencies that violate rules and regulations with impunity. "Let us provide incentives to recruitment agencies that promote best practices and punish those who are simply out to bilk job applicants and OFWs of their hard-earned money," Villar said.

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