# To die unseen on foreign soil

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The clock is ticking for 44 Filipinos on death row abroad, as Philippine diplomats quietly plead with host governments for mercy on behalf of our imprisoned compatriots, some if not most of whom are victims of injustice in one form or another.

Oddly enough, the information didn’t come directly from either the Department of Migrant Workers or the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), but from Sen. Joel Villanueva, who sponsored the DMW’s proposed 2025 budget on the Senate floor last week.

Citing data from the DMW, the senator said 41 of the Filipinos awaiting execution were in Malaysia, two in Brunei, and the last in Saudi Arabia. All but eight of the convicts in Malaysia were men, most of them caught in possession of illegal drugs. One of the Brunei cases involved a Filipino driver convicted for the murder of a local, and the other for stabbing his girlfriend to death. The lone Saudi case was a woman sentenced to die for killing her abusive employer.

Little else was reported, however, about the progress of Philippine appeals to delay and ultimately stop the enforcement of capital punishment on the Filipinos.

## Shrouded in secrecy

It is understandable that these cases are shrouded in secrecy on account of the sensitivity of the crimes in question or the countries’ legal obligation to protect the privacy of victims and perpetrators alike.

But one other recent case gives us pause—the Oct. 5 execution of a male overseas Filipino worker (OFW) in Saudi Arabia, who killed a local purportedly in self-defense. The execution was not disclosed by the DFA until Oct. 8, presumably to give time for emissaries to properly inform the man’s family.

Still, the news of the Filipino’s death by execution in a foreign land came as a jolt, with no preamble nor prior warning. In itself, the suddenness was a compelling argument against silence as the correct approach to such delicate cases. Instead, transparency might be the wiser recourse, as it gives the Philippines a powerful weapon in the fight to keep its citizens alive: public pressure.

Of course, public pressure is not always an effective instrument in swaying a government to preserve a life. It certainly didn’t help in multiple cases of Filipino drug mules executed in China over the years.

## Contemplacion case

Most infamously, the case of Flor Contemplacion, a domestic worker who was hanged in 1995 after being convicted of murdering another OFW and a boy in her care four years earlier, sparked diplomatic tensions between the Philippines and Singapore that took many years to ease. But the ensuing furor had no doubt compelled the government to take all measures necessary to save another OFW, Sarah Balabagan, who was poised to die by firing squad in the United Arab Emirates for murder, mere months after the Contemplacion case.

The Philippines’ efforts paid off, and Balabagan’s punishment was reduced to a year in prison and caning. In 1996, she returned home to the Philippines to a hero’s welcome.

To a large extent, public sentiment and media attention have lengthened the lease on life of another Filipino on death row in Indonesia—Mary Jane Veloso—who has remained behind bars since 2.6 kilograms of heroin was found in her suitcase at Yogyakarta’s Adisucipto International Airport in April 2010.

Sentenced to death by firing squad, the OFW got a last-minute reprieve in 2015 when then President Benigno Aquino III reportedly breached diplomatic protocols to save her, after new evidence emerged that she was the victim of a drug trafficking syndicate. Veloso’s life remains in limbo, as arrangements to bring her back to the country to serve her sentence here are in the works.

## Power of national clamor

Such cases are a call to action for agencies to heighten efforts to educate departing migrants about the risks of working in countries that impose the death penalty and whose cultures starkly differ from ours. More than ever, embassies and consulates must serve as safe havens for distressed OFWs, giving them timely intervention during emergencies, while pushing for more humane punishment in lieu of death in those countries.

There is, too, the larger conversation about rejecting the so-called labor export policy that exposes our countrymen to crime and exploitation abroad and offering more opportunities to keep them here.

Finally, the government must not be blind to the power of national clamor and consider a policy of transparency on the status of Filipinos on death row. The demand is not to expose their identities and circumstances, but to duly inform the public about their cases and what officials are doing to defend them.

Although not a guarantee, a collective outcry, as history has shown, can tip the scales in favor of Filipino migrants facing execution abroad. But by keeping these cases hidden, the government denies the people the chance to rally for our own—to mobilize, to raise attention, to appeal for compassion.

Worse yet, it condemns Filipinos to die unseen and unlamented on foreign soil.