# Hurrying Harry home

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On Monday, the Department of Justice (DOJ) filed a motion to cancel the passport of former presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, who has fled the country after being linked to illegal Philippine offshore gaming operators (Pogos). Claiming government persecution, Roque is seeking political asylum in the Netherlands.

Canceling his passport will make him an undocumented alien subject to deportation, DOJ Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla said of Roque, now the subject of an arrest warrant recently issued by a Pampanga court for qualified human trafficking, a nonbailable offense. The government will also seek Interpol assistance and use diplomatic channels to bring Roque back to face the court, Remulla added.

For months, Roque had ignored government summons for him to cooperate with a House probe on his links to a Pogo hub in Porac, Pampanga, found to be hosting criminal activities. Asked about his suspiciously inflated assets in the hearing, Roque had promised to show the House prosecution panel documents proving the legality of his sudden wealth. Instead, he slipped out of the country and surfaced in the Netherlands in March.

Although he has denied it, Roque was listed as the legal officer of Lucky South 99 in documents found at the property during a government raid in June 2024, following allegations of torture, human trafficking, and scamming activities.

## A front for scams

An earlier raid on another Pogo facility in Bamban, Tarlac, yielded evidence of similar scam operations, while subsequent House hearings on Pogos in May 2024 uncovered the use of falsified birth certificates to fake Filipino citizenship, as well as possible spying activities by no less than former Bamban, Tarlac mayor Alice Guo. Guo managed to escape but was captured in Indonesia in September last year. She is now being held in a Pasig jail on scores of money laundering cases.

Despite avowals of distaste for online gambling, former president Rodrigo Duterte allowed Pogo hubs to flourish, citing increased government revenues. In 2020, he urged Congress to pass a law legalizing and regulating Pogos amid complaints that they were being used as a front for scams, money laundering, forced labor, and kidnapping for ransom. In July last year, President Marcos issued a ban on Pogos, and set their complete withdrawal from the country by end of 2024.

That should have been the cue for law enforcement agencies to act swiftly to file charges against top personalities involved in the now illegal trade. The campaign to deport or expel foreign nationals working in the shuttered Pogo hubs should have been left to the Bureau of Immigration (BI), to allow police and criminal detection agencies to build up solid cases against Pogo principals.

## Backdoor exit

For the longest time, Roque had mocked the Marcos government for its unsuccessful attempts to pull him back into the country for House hearings. Roque had been making noises that all government moves against him will prove that he is being persecuted and that this will strengthen his application for asylum.

“Flight is an indication of guilt,” Remulla has said of Roque, a fugitive who could soon be under a red notice from the Interpol. With the Netherlands among the countries that consider human trafficking a major crime, Roque’s asylum prospects seem nil, Remulla added.

With the long arm of the law extending overseas to claw back Roque, the justice official has commendably done some house cleaning on the local front as well. He has questioned the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) on gathered information that Roque has two or three passports that allowed him to leave the country without setting off alarms. Did DFA and BI insiders facilitate this anomalous process? It’s bad enough that felons and criminals have been known to use the country’s backdoor exit and porous borders with impunity, but being aided by government insiders make it worse.

## Influential fugitives

The Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) and the National Bureau of Investigation should be as thorough in going after those who had contributed to making Pogos and their principals a scourge, including the civil registrars in several Mindanao provinces said to have issued fake birth certificates to foreign nationals.

The arrest last week of a Roque coaccused in the qualified human trafficking case—“the first of the 51,” according to CIDG chief Police Maj. Gen. Nicolas Torre III, is encouraging. All of them, Roque included, must be made to face charges to demonstrate the government’s seriousness in rooting out the criminal activities brought about by the Pogo industry.

On Wednesday, it was reported that Arnolfo Teves Jr., who is facing murder charges for the killing of a political opponent, was arrested in Timor-Leste where he fled to seek asylum. This is another positive development in efforts to bring back influential fugitives who have flouted our laws and made a mockery of our justice system. Will Roque be next?