Area Immigrants Sending Food to Home Countries; International Shortages and Price Increases Prompt Micro-Level Relief

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Body

Jovy Mark showed up at Manila Oriental, a Falls Church grocery that doubles as an agent for Filipino shipping companies, lugging two hefty boxes destined for relatives in the Philippines. Inside: Four 25-pound bags of Japanese rice, purchased at a Korean supermarket in Virginia and about to make a trip back to Asia.

"They are really short of rice over there," said Mark, 59, a nanny who lives in Manassas. "My brother said the [***price*** of] rice is going up. So what I did, I said, 'All right, I'll look for rice that is cheaper over here.' "

As the United Nations met in Rome last week to discuss ***shortages*** and high ***prices*** of ***food*** and ***international*** charities scramble to help the nations hardest-hit by the global ***food*** crisis, some ***immigrants*** in the United States are providing their own version of ***food*** aid. They are paying to have provisions delivered to hungry relatives at ***home***.

Filipinos in the Washington region say the unthinkable has become fairly common in recent months: Migrants are stuffing sacks of rice into care packages known as balikbayan boxes and shipping them to the Philippines, where ***shortages*** have led to soaring ***prices*** and rationing. ***Area immigrants*** from Haiti, where skyrocketing ***prices*** have sparked riots, are boosting orders of ***food*** from U.S.-based money transfer agents. The orders are plucked from the shelves of warehouses in Haiti and delivered to recipients within hours.

These blips on the global ***food*** shipment landscape, of course, are not going to lift poor nations out of crisis. In interviews, ***immigrants*** from several ***countries*** said most of their compatriots are ***sending*** more money, if anything, to help relatives deal with ***food*** costs.

"That would be too expensive!" said Celestin Njibeck, about shipping ***food*** to his native Cameroon, where high ***prices*** have also triggered civil unrest. He was rolling napkins at the Silver Spring restaurant he manages, which is struggling with ***food*** cost problems. Njibeck is considering raising menu ***prices***.

In fact, the Filipino and Haitian ***food*** deliveries say more about ***country***-specific systems to transfer ***immigrant*** earnings than about ***shortages*** in those nations. Remittance researchers say ***immigrants*** from nearly all ***countries send*** money ***home***, a flow estimated to be as much as $300 billion a year, most of which is used to buy ***food***. Only some ***immigrant*** groups also have well-established systems for the transfers of goods, said Manuel Orozco, a remittance expert at Georgetown University.

Among them is the Filipino practice of ***sending*** 23-by-20-by-17-inch boxes packed with U.S. products, which are typically shipped for a flat rate of about $100 no matter what's stuffed inside. Another is the Haitian ***food*** transfer system, a method experts say has never taken off in other nations. Both are now facilitating family-level ***food*** aid.

On a recent afternoon, Jimmy Alazi paid $107 at Taptap Inc. on Georgia Avenue in the District, a one-desk office where Haitian expatriates can select from a product list that includes 24 cans of tomato paste ($42) and one live goat ($76). Alazi had chosen basics for friends in Port-au-Prince: 55 pounds of rice, three gallons of cooking oil, 25 pounds of black beans, 20 packets of spaghetti and 27.5 pounds of sugar.

"When you ***send*** money they can use it for other things," said Alazi, 38, a Fort Washington insurance agent. "I want them to eat."

At Esther Express, a Silver Spring agent for the Haitian remitter Unitransfer, ***food*** transfers have doubled in the past three months, owner Rony Pierre said. At Taptap, an agent for the Miami-based Caribbean AirMail, ***food*** transfers have tripled in that time, according to owner John Boursiquot.

"Almost 90 percent of the people that come here, they say people are hungry, so they have to ***send food*** instead of cash," said Boursiquot, who counts himself among those driving the trend. On Monday, instead of transferring the $300 he usually ***sends*** to relatives in the southern city of Jacmel, he ***sent*** $100 in cash and $200 worth of comestibles.

Officials at Forex, a top Filipino shipping company based in Alexandria, began noticing more rice in balikbayan boxes earlier this year. So the company launched a special offer to "demonstrate our social conscience," said founder Jaime CariÃ±o: For a limited time, ***immigrants*** in the United States can ship 25-pound bags of rice -- no need for a box -- for $15 each. About 1,200 bags have been ***sent*** each month for the past three months, the company said.

If ***sending*** rice to the Philippines rings of carrying coals to Newcastle, some Filipino community groups agree. The National Federation of Filipino American Associations is encouraging ***immigrants*** to ***send*** money instead, noting that although rice is expensive in the Philippines, it is available.

Besides, rice ***prices*** have shot up stateside. A 25-pound bag of the Thai jasmine rice preferred by Filipinos hovers around $20, up from about $12.75 six weeks ago. And shipments take at least a month to arrive (although when they do, the deliveryman snaps a photo of the happy recipient with the box and mails it to the sender).

But to those ***sending*** rice, it makes a certain sort of inevitable sense. The Philippines is the world's biggest importer of rice, which accompanies three meals a day and sometimes serves as a snack. Rice is "like a religion," Manila Oriental shopper Rudy Mendoza said. Nearby hung a poster pitching the Forex special, which exhorted shoppers in Tagalog to "Help the Rice Crisis in the Philippines."

Most customers deem it more economical to ***send*** rice in balikbayan boxes, said the store's ***food*** service manager, Christie Zerrudo. She is preparing a box of clothes and canned goods, anchored by two 25-pound bags of jasmine rice. It will be a surprise for her brother, who operates a tricycle-for-hire in Manila and who recently told her the rice available there tastes bad.

"It just breaks my heart. I said, 'Don't eat it,' " Zerrudo said. "I told them, 'I'll ***send*** you a bag of rice.' "

Maila Mabolo, a chef who lives in Suitland, has ***sent*** two installments of rice to Manila. Her brothers complained that government-subsidized rice, which is rationed and offered at about 20 cents per pound, gives them stomachaches. Better-quality commercial rice goes for more than twice as much.

"My brothers are going to the line for three hours, and they will get only three kilos," said Mabolo, 37, as she piled boxes of mangoes into her trunk outside Manila Oriental. "I'm not going to let my brothers struggle, doing like that."

For Arnedo Valera, a Fairfax lawyer and executive director of the Migrant Heritage Commission, ***sending*** rice is "a political statement." If Filipino customs agents see it, he explained, they will have yet more evidence that Filipino expatriates, who ***sent*** ***home*** nearly $15 billion in 2006, are keeping the Philippines humming.

After a visit to Haiti in December, when ***prices*** were on the rise, Remy Darisme stopped shipping a monthly box of ***food*** to Haiti.

He upgraded to a barrel, which he fills with oil, powdered milk and cereal purchased at Costco. He ***sends*** it through Esther Express, which also offers a cargo shipping service. In April, as ***food*** riots broke out, he dispatched two barrels to friends and relatives.

"We are here. We've got health. We can work," said Darisme, 50, a Silver Spring taxi driver. "We've got to think about them. "

Graphic

IMAGE; Photos By Katherine Frey -- The Washington Post; Some ***immigrants*** are responding to news of ***food shortages*** in their ***home countries*** not by ***sending*** money but by shipping out ***food***. The Rice family of Herndon, from left, Elysha, 3, Jessica, 9, and their mother Melinda, prefer to ***send*** money to their relatives in the Philippines.

IMAGE; In the United States, a 25-pound bag of the Thai jasmine rice preferred by Filipinos hovers around $20, up from about $12.75 six weeks ago.

IMAGE; By Katherine Frey -- The Washington Post; Manila Oriental ***food*** service manager Christie Zerrudo is ***sending*** 50 pounds of rice to her brother in the Philippines.

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