

# OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS



**Freda Editha O. Contreras**

# Overview and Dedication

JULY 17, 2012 · 2:27 AM

This book is a collection of articles and stories published in Suite101.com, a writers' portal on the world wide web, between the period August 1999 and December 202 under the topic "Overseas Filipino Workers."

Dedicated to the eight million or so overseas Filipinos working in over 200 destinations in the world.

# Acknowledgement

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Without the selfless help of a number of friends, mostly cyber friends, this book would have not been made possible. Through their encouragement and actual contribution from their pockets, the project successfully took off in April 2007.

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To my faceless friends and supporters subscribed to the various mailing lists – OFW Club, OFW-Kuwait, OFW-Saudi, FilAm Forum, WOWPhilippines Core Group, Moonglow Planet, OFWNetFI, to name a few – I belong to, I thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

And last but not the least, I thank my husband – Waleed Ahmed Hussain Ali Buhaimeed – who has always been with me, loving and supporting me all the way, and giving me hope to go on despite the many odds in life I face.

– Freda Editha O. Contreras

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# Prologue

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It was in early February 1999 when I first learned about Suite101.com's need for Contributing Editors (CE). I read it in a writers' forum in iVillage online community which I just newly joined. The source of the information was from another Filipina, Ruby Bayan, who already was maintaining Inspiration/Motivation topic on Suite101.com.

Nearly a year has passed since my failed newspapering ventures in Kuwait. I was dying to write again and the call was just what I needed. I visited the site and made a feel first of its many features. I readily saw the clickable icon which leads to the contributing editor application.

"No, not yet. I will browse through the site first and get an idea of what topic to start writing about," I told myself then.

It was March 8, 1999 when I initially submitted my application as a CE. I followed it up with an email to Jason Pamer, Editor in Chief of Suite101.com:

"Hello from Kuwait! I've just entered a new topic and I have this doubt if you would accept it or not. I'm just being honest with you and with myself: writing about and for the Filipinos is the one closest to my heart. I've been hanging around your site for a while now trying to figure out, from your list, which is the best for me (as we are allowed only to maintain one topic) and only today I've finally thought about it. And besides, it's what my previous 17 years of writing experience is mostly about.

"If you think that my topic is not suitable for you (it will be to some over 4 million Filipinos in the world though!), please tell me ASAP so I don't need to continue with the Contributing Editor application."

Mr. Pamer responded: "Thank you for submitting an application form to Suite101.com! Once we have a chance to review it, I'll get back to you with more information."

The application process was in a step-by-step manner. You fill one form and submit then wait for a prompt to continue to the next step. If you submitted something not conforming to Suite101.com's guidelines, you can't go to the next step. That was what happened to my application after I submitted 'Links' as required. I then again sent a note to Mr. Pamer, to wit:

“Dear Mr. Pamer,

“I’ve just submitted an Editor’s application after completing the step-by-step procedure. However it was not accepted because of the links I’ve submitted. There were only five listed, instead of the required 15. I’m sorry for not notifying you about it before submitting the application. It was of course clearly mentioned in the Links guide but in my haste to finish the task, I missed doing it as instructed.

“As the topic I chose is not really “big” I had no other choice but to submit only five links. Most of those I researched are nonetheless mentioned under the “Tanikalang Ginto” website. As my topic grows (hopefully) and as I gain a steady following, then some sites would be considered (from a list I have compiled) for sure. But for now, I’ll settle with only five sites – LESS but DIRECTLY and APPROPRIATELY focused on my chosen topic.

“I do hope to be considered. Thanking you in advance and with all my respect, I am

Freda Editha O. Contreras”

Mr. Pamer’s reply was brief and straight to the point: “Thank you for filling out a Suite101.com Application form. Please continue working on it until you’ve submitted 15 sites. You can then submit it again for review by our staff.”

I spent the following week browsing the Internet for Filipino-related sites. I actually didn’t go far as I simply went through Kenneth Ilio’s “Tanikalang Ginto” site. It had a ‘Diaspora’ section and that’s where I opened one by one the links featured. I read thoroughly and even took notes because I wanted to learn about the ‘Links’ which I would add to my already previously submitted five links. I needed 10 additional links.

When done, I happily submitted the 10 links. I was then taken to a new page instructing me to write an article. It did not take me long to compose the article and on the same night I did the links, I submitted my story and got relieved that it was the last of the requirements.

Early May, I got restless because I still didn’t hear about my CE application. I regularly visited the site with a hope to see my topic. I thought then that maybe the management will just go ahead and upload my site without informing me firsthand of its approval. I got frustrated each time. Around that time, I



received an invitation from Suite101.com to participate in an online discussion. The email I received with the invitation gave me the courage to write Mr. Pamer and inquired about my application. This was the letter I wrote then, dated May 5, 1999:

“Dear Mr. Pamer,

“Greetings from Kuwait!

“Please excuse my inquiry but I am just wondering – did you receive the CE application I sent over a month ago? Has it been reviewed yet? Is there any problem and could you give me a chance to remedy it if there’s any?

“My Suite101 member’s name is gem57 and the profile I’ve written for my CE application has already been viewed by one of your CEs.

“I hope you remember – I wrote to you before asking your opinion as to the appeal of my chosen topic which is “The Overseas Filipino Workers” as I had doubts then if you’ll accept it. You promptly responded to me and kindly told me that I should go on working with the topic and once finished, you’ll review it. Well, I finished and submitted my application over a month ago.

“I am sorry to disturb you but this waiting period is really hard for me. Was frustrated earlier after opening an email from you. Thought it was already an answer to my CE application. It was not. It was an invitation to participate in an Online Focus Group discussion!

“Here’s hoping that an answer – good or bad – is now upcoming.

“Thanks and regards,

“Freda Editha O. Contreras.

I never got a response from that email. I took it then that my application was disapproved. I lost interest and forgot all about it. Ruby, who has then become a friend, kept on urging me to wait and not to give up. She said that Suite101 is doing some major changes on the site and that could be the reason

why my application was on hold. Left with no other recourse, I waited patiently. I tried hard to wait patiently, that is.

On August 16, 1999 I finally heard from Suite101 regarding my CE application. Managing Editor Jessica Hutson wrote to me the following:

“I have spent time researching your topic since your application. As far as the topic goes, I would like to know what you see as the future of this topic and how often would you intend to write. Please send at least 5 future ideas.”

So the delay, after all was caused by Suite101.com’s apprehension as to the sustainability of my chosen topic. I felt that the management didn’t like my topic. Unable to accept defeat, I tried to convince them otherwise by responding with the following letter:

“I thank you so much for this most awaited reply. Finally, after waiting for over three months, I got an answer!

“My first ever communication, addressed to Mr. Jason Pamer, was written after I decided on the topic I was going to cover as Suite101 contributing editor applicant. I mentioned to Mr. Pamer then that “writing about and for the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) is the most closest to my heart.” I likewise expressed my doubt in the suitability of my chosen topic and Mr. Pamer was kind enough to encourage me to continue writing on the topic and once submitted, it will be reviewed, he said.

“My vision and mission for my chosen topic is global in a way. As mentioned in my article submitted, there are nearly five million OFWs all over the world. The figure actually reflects only the documented workers. If we add the undocumented ones, the figure could go up to as high as six to seven million. A topic on and for OFWs at Suite101 will be timely appropriate as reading something about them or just knowing that they are a topic for a discussion in a prestigious site on the web, would add spice to their rather monotonous life.

“I am an OFW myself and I’ve spent the last 12 years of my life working abroad. I know all the OFWs’ problems and needs and I believe that most, if not all can be remedied or answered. My topic on Suite101 will be the OFWs’ voice and window to the world. I do believe that given enough time and exposure, OFWs in all corners of the world, would soon know of the topic and start reacting and interacting.

“Most of the OFWs have access to the Internet. They will have more time and chance to explore the world wide web than any of their counterparts in the Philippines. Just take my case as an example. As a school nurse working in the Philippines, I won’t have the chance at all to know about the Internet – much more the use of a PC.

“My point here is that with the modern technology easily accessible to OFWs around the world, I might be able to work out our life-long dream of making our life, and our family’s back home, easier and better.

“My plan for my site, if ever accepted, is to inform all the Philippine embassies and consulates abroad about its existence. Likewise, all the major Philippine government offices will be notified. Through them, OFWs will be informed of the site. In Kuwait, having the best relation with both the Embassy officials and the Filipino Community, I plan to print out my article and distribute it to the Filipinos.

“Subjects are plentiful, which I plan, initially, to write and submit twice a month. I may start with the subject of “What you should know about . . .” – which could be as many a topic as I would want to write about. There are a lot of laws and governances pertaining to the OFWs which are not very clear to the public, like the 1995 Magna Carta for OFWs. This subject alone is vast. I can also start discussion on what the government agencies are doing for the OFWs. These agencies are plentiful and I won’t be able to cover one with just a one-time article writing.

“You may think that the topic on OFWs is limited but believe me, in my years of writing about OFWs in Kuwait, I still did not cover all subjects. And there will always be something new which will come out. I have been a writer in the past 17 years and one of my most valuable assets is RESOURCEFULNESS!”

I received a reply from Ms. Hutson two days after, to wit:

“Thanks for your clarification. I do love your enthusiasm, dedication and knowledge. I am sending my approval on your application to Jason Pamer.”

I immediately responded and wrote: “I thank you so much for your confidence in me. Your approval of my CE application, although still not final, means so much to me. I hope and pray that Mr. Pamer will also approve my application.”

A few hours after I received word from Ms. Hutson, she again sent me another email. She noted: “Hopefully you have heard from Jason. My guess is that there will be no problem with your application. I

have only had Jason turn down one approval in the past. Please always feel free to send in questions and comments.”

It was followed up by another email received shortly after the previous one. I felt Ms. Hutson’s excitement when she wrote: “You are now official – you can expect the editor agreement from Jason this afternoon. Welcome!”

Sure enough, after less than an hour, an email was received from Mr. Pamer. Here’s part of what he wrote:

“I reviewed your application this week – very impressive. It is obvious that you are very knowledgeable about, and have great passion for, Overseas Filipino Workers. I would be very pleased to have you on the Suite101.com Contributing Editors team.”

On the same day, I saw my topic Overseas Filipino Workers online for the first time. My first ever article, “The Overseas Filipino Workers”, written in advance as part of the step-by-step application process I went through in the past, was already posted on the site. At long last!

It was awe-inspiring and I couldn’t believe I finally made it!

In gratitude, I wrote to Mr. Pamer: “Thank you so much for the chance of giving a special place for us overseas Filipino workers in your most prestigious Suite101 site! The long wait has proven its worth when I finally saw my topic first-listed under the New Topics. The happiness I felt was that much that I immediately added a Welcome message to my page!”

There were 735 topics on Suite101.com when my topic on Overseas Filipino Workers was added. My topic went under the Society and Culture main group and Culture/People sub-group. The Culture/People sub-group was managed by Jessica Hutson. There were 36 topics under her when I initially joined.

From August 18, 1999 until December 31, 2002 I have written 38 articles in all. One story, “Celebrating our being Filipino”, written by a guest writer, Rhoel Raymundo Mendoza, an ex-OFW from Saudi Arabia, was featured on April 18, 2002.

Twice during the three-year-period of writing for Suite101.com, I went irregular with my writing schedule. The longest of which was six months. Because of the length of my inability to submit articles, I was stripped off of my privilege as an editor. I couldn't access the submission page thus when I was ready to write anew, I couldn't submit my story. By then the managing editor was changed. Ms. Hutson left Suite101.com and was replaced by Carl Johnson. I sent him an email informing him that I would want to write again. His response was brief but was hurting for me. I responded back and told him the following:

"Thanks for your reply. I know that there's no excuse for my neglect of the OFW topic and I should really have informed the management of my inability to maintain it. For this, I am sorry.

"Have you ever been out of your country, Carl? I mean away from all your loved ones and all those dear to you? Working and worrying yourself to death in a foreign country just so you can provide the best for your loved ones? I believe each person responds differently to a given stress. I congratulate you for being an expert in time management but I guess you don't have 20 mouths to feed, a mother who is not only diabetic but also suffers from a terminal breast cancer, an old nanny who is paralyzed and suffering from TB of the bone, a sister who is schizophrenic and been in and out of a private asylum, a body which isn't only being wasted away by cancer, diabetes and a deteriorating hearing loss but also boned-brittle because of a rare hereditary condition as osteogenesis imperfecta. And to top it all, a work environment wherein you are continuously in danger of being terminated because of discrimination! I know that answering emails doesn't take long – that's why I've managed to answer all those emails sent privately by visitors of the OFW-S101 site. And not just a simple answer as most of the times I have to answer some questions they asked regarding their research, thesis, studies, surveys, whatever – all in connection with the OFWs.

"Ah, I am now talking too much. Sorry, I got carried away.

"I would like, please, to submit articles monthly, if it's possible? Please let me know when I can start submitting.

"Yours,

"Freda, one of those real people who helps real people.

Over a year prior, I missed submitting stories for two months and I promptly informed the management about it. When I got ready to submit stories again, I sent notice to Mr. Pamer dated March 1, 2000, to wit:

“Although I mentioned the last time that I felt inadequate to go on with the task of maintaining my OFW topic, I did not cease visiting my site on a daily basis.

“My crisis is over and I feel now free and ready to face whatever life has to offer. This is then to inform you of my intention to start writing again. I really can’t leave the OFW-Suite101 site because it already acquired a good and regular following. People are regularly writing to me and some are asking help, aside from inquiries in relation to a particular topic I have covered. One Philippine government official even wrote to me recently asking to write about his agency’s latest program for OFWs (it will be the subject of my next article). And I am now in communication with one doctorate student, helping her in her dissertation re OFWs. One student was also assisted a month ago, also in relation to a research paper he was doing. Both students contacted me thru the OFW-S101 site and both are studying in the US.

“I would like to continue with the same article submission frequency/schedule as I had the last time which is: twice a month/Tuesday release. Hope this won’t be a problem.”

Mr. Pamer responded promptly and told me that he was glad I was not abandoning completely my OFW topic.

Although I stopped, in the end, submitting stories after my last article was published on December 30, 2002, the OFW topic continued to be viewed online until January 2006 when Suite101.com management made an overhaul of the site.

#### The Welcome Page

WHEREVER you are and whatever work you are engaged in, you overseas Filipinos are welcome to this your page on Suite101.com! This page is a tribute to your hard labor and sacrifices just so you could provide the best for your family and loved ones back home in the Philippines. This page is also your source of information and link to all agencies – both government and private – or any other entities focusing in you and your affairs at home and in your place of work abroad. I welcome you all with warmth and sincerity!

I welcome visitors and guests as well. Let me introduce you to this group of working people who are now considered the main saviors of their country in its struggle to maintain economic stability. In here you will learn that while most countries boast of oil and other products as its main source of income, the Philippines boasts of its manpower or the so-called “human” exports. But I would say human EXPERTS!

WELCOME, welcome everyone! I hope you will all enjoy your stay – brief though it may be.

#### WHAT OTHERS SAY . . .

“The money that entertainers and other working migrants send home is extraordinary. Young teachers in the Philippines make an average of US\$150 a month compared with entertainers’ US\$500. The transfer of funds from migrants to their home countries, if lumped together, is one of the largest single movements of money in the world.

“In the Philippines it is estimated eight billion dollars a year, almost three times the amount the Philippines receives in foreign aid. None of the workers had signed papers saying that they were going to return a single penny. Yet they did send home a vast amount of money, whole national defense budgets’ worth of money, because of LOVE.”

– Michael Parfit, “Human Migration,” National Geographic Magazine, October 1998.

“When my husband was stationed at Anderson Air Force Base on the island of Guam, we had for three years what was then called a Filipino “house boy”. He came early every week-day morning and prepared three meals a day for us, and was a terrific house keeper! He even did our grocery, shopping and laundry! When we entertained, he was there with his white jacket on preparing food and serving guests. Certain officers’ wives constantly tried to take him from us but he remained faithful to us. (Actually, I think he was fascinated by my Southern accent!) He taught me how to make malasadas and pork adobo the correct way! The bulk of his wages, he sent back to the Philippines to his family. He was a good person! There were many Filipino nationals in the Mariannas Islands who worked for the government and military families. They were well-liked and well-mannered. I will never forget Jesus (Hey-jus).

– Virginia Marin, Contributing Editor, Suite101.com

#### The Profile

On the main page of my topic, my name was clickable. Once clicked, it would take you to another page which showed my Profile. This Profile was written in early April 1999 at the time I was filling up my application as a contributing editor.

Freda Editha O. Contreras

Topic: Overseas Filipino Workers

Email: fredacontreras@hotmail.com

Home page: <http://members.theglobe.com/freda9>

City/State: Safat, Kuwait

A nurse by profession, I joined the rank of overseas Filipino workers when recruited in 1987 to work in Kuwait. Prior to leaving the Philippines, I was doing good in the field of Journalism – became a news reporter, an associate editor and executive editor of a provincial newspaper in a span of five and a half years – but was lured to work abroad because of family need. Having had the writing experience, I took the courage of submitting stories to the only two English dailies in Kuwait. I was then offered a part time job by Kuwait Times. Seeing a chance for the nearly 65,000 Filipino workers in Kuwait to shine, I suggested a special section, and just over a month of joining KT, the first 2-page “PINOY News” came out. For nearly two years, I became the writer, editor, photographer, typesetter and lay-out artist of the paper. Sad to say, an unresolved conflict with a lady KT official ended that special section for Filipinos.

In less than a year an offer came to establish an independent newspaper for Filipinos. In spite of a previous bad experience, I grabbed the opportunity, and the first issue of the 16-page ‘Pinoy Expat News’ (PEN) came off the press three weeks after. With only one field reporter and two contributors, I managed to run the paper (aside from a fulltime nursing job and a regular writing contribution to a weekly magazine. Unfortunately, after a long and tedious battle of acquiring a license from the Ministry of Information, the Kuwaiti sponsor did not make it. PEN lasted for only 10 weekly issues.

Not fully recovered yet from that failed attempt of giving something special to the Filipinos in Kuwait, I accepted another offer and “PINOY News” saw print again, first as a special 4-page supplement of the weekly “Eye Catchers” ad paper and later as a separate 16-page full color newspaper. Alas, because of the much publicized Iraq-UN tension in the early months of 1998, the paper lasted only three issues!

I still dream of putting up an independent paper for Filipinos in Kuwait and the Gulf. When this could be realized, only God knows! I may not have the financial resources now, but I do have a very strong faith



and I am one person who doesn't easily give up so I know, and I believe in my heart, that one day my dream will be fulfilled!

I am an avid reader and I would say I learned how to write because of reading. I love to do things on my own and if I really want to learn and do something I usually succeed. Playing musical instruments (piano/organ, guitar and accordion), mastering the typewriter and later the PC, designing newspapers and magazines and of course editing and writing, are just a few of the things I learned on my own because I wanted to. Living in a high storey building with small verandas, I plant vegetables, aside from flowers and shrubs, and now am merely picking tomatoes, lettuce and beans whenever I need them for cooking. Whenever I tell this to friends and colleagues, and see their unbelieving eyes afterwards, I always smile. They may not believe it, but it's true!

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## **The overseas Filipino workers**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 18, 1999

FILIPINO workers are everywhere. They come in thousands at any given place in the world – with the exception of a few selective countries – and stay for as long as their contracts could hold.

A latest survey shows that there are now nearly five million overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). Their earnings abroad, which they diligently send to their family home, are now the main players in the Philippine government's bid for a full economic recovery. The OFWs are their country's number one dollar earners, funneling billions and billions of dollars each year to the mainstream of Philippine economy!

Time and again, the Philippine government tries to drumbeat the OFWs' marked contribution to the country's economy. The government officials, especially those who are periodically elected, have lately been vocal in their acceptance and recognition of the OFWs' sacrifices abroad. They have even called the OFWs the "New Heroes" of the modern-day Philippines.

Two special government entities under the Department of Labor and Employment have long been established, namely: the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA). In 1995, after that well-publicized hanging of a Filipina maid in Singapore, the Philippine Senate approved the 'Magna Carta' for overseas contract workers, supposedly, to protect and preserve the rights of OFWs. Over a year prior to that, a special representative of OFWs to

the Congress was elected in the person of Omar Fajardo, himself, a long-time OFW in Saudi Arabia. Through his representation, the OFWs are now exempted from paying their annual income tax.

Some of the other privileges that the OFWs now enjoy since two or three years back are: a) exemption from paying travel tax; b) exemption from paying airport tax; c) enjoyment of a "\$2,000-limit" duty free shopping at a specially created store near the Manila airport; d) processing of "Balik-Manggagawa" (returning workers) papers at the embassy or consulate office located at worksite; e) enjoyment of personal or business loan packages offered by OWWA and selected Philippine banks; f) free training and or business workshop/seminars for returning OFWs; g) free legal assistance for job-related disputes at worksite; h) enjoyment of a housing loan through membership to "PAG-IBIG Overseas Program"; i) medical assistance through membership to the government's 'Medicare' program; and a lot others under the OWWA, which, includes, among others, insurance coverage.

In the years to come, it is predicted that more and more Filipinos would find jobs outside the Philippines. It is not only the lure and a now seemingly felt 'prestige' of working abroad which drives a Filipino worker out of his country; it is also, and most importantly, the need to earn better.

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## Remembering Flor, Delia and Sarah

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 31, 1999

FLOR Contemplacion, aged 42, hanged in Singapore in March 1995. Delia Maga, aged 34, murdered in Singapore in May 1991 together with her four-year-old ward, allegedly by Flor. Sarah Balabagan, aged 17, sentenced to die in 1995 by a court in the United Arab Emirates after stabbing to death her 54-year-old employer/rapist but was later freed.

All the above-named are Filipina domestic helpers who were forced to leave their families behind to venture into foreign lands in search of a greener pasture. Their cases, I would say, helped shape what is now conceived as the Philippine government's "best" way of looking after the millions of overseas Filipino workers.

Sad to say, when Filipinos, by the thousands, started to work in foreign countries in the early '70s, the Philippine government had no concrete plans and laws to govern what it then termed as labor export. Filipinos, I remember then, were in demand especially in Saudi Arabia and the surrounding oil-rich areas

in the Gulf. The struggling economy of the country, just over a year after the big bulk of Filipino workers left overseas to work, began to show improvement. Why, you may ask. The overseas Filipino workers regularly sent money home, which, collectively, amounted to more than what the government could get from its other export products!

Millions of dollars that year were funneled into the mainstream of the country's economy. In the ensuing years, millions turned to billions and the government started to rely on the overseas Filipino workers' earnings abroad. Officials though were silent about this development but were very aggressive in encouraging Filipinos to work abroad. They never minded sending Filipino workers even to countries where the Philippines has no bilateral relations or whatsoever with.

With their numbers increasing by the millions every year, cases of Filipinos running into trouble started to pile up. With women being the most numbered of those going out every year, cases of abuse, maltreatment, rape and even death soon surfaced.

These cases, according to government officials, are isolated, very isolated that they could afford to be quiet about them. Until Flor Contemplacion entered the limelight and created a chain of events which prompted them to move and do something for the protection of the millions of overseas Filipino workers!

In a statement given to the press after a meeting with a number of recalled heads of selected diplomatic missions abroad, then Secretary of Foreign Affairs Roberto Romulo said and I quote:

"There are lessons to be drawn from the Contemplacion case. This case compels us to take stock of all existing government policies and procedures for assistance and protection of overseas workers."

In the same year that Flor was hanged in Singapore, a law passed by the Congress was finally enacted. This law, popularly known as the "1995 Magna Carta for OCWs" (or overseas contract workers, the term used before by public officials), for me, is a strong indication of the government's haphazard way of protecting its citizens working abroad. It could do better though.

Being into this roller coaster of an issue in the past 11 years or so, I would guess that improvement to existing policies or amendment to this existing law will again require another isolated case or cases. What, where and who – these questions all remain to be seen.

But one thing is clear to me – had it not been for the likes of Flor Contemplacion, Delia Maga and Sarah Balabagan, the overseas Filipino workers would have not been heard of at all! Ironical so it seems, heroic deeds and outstanding work performances of this “special class of Filipinos” – to borrow President Joseph “Erap” Estrada’s latest term – remain unheard of!

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## Should I go or should I stay?

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: September 14, 1999

THESE two opposing questions, I believe, are the most-asked by overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), most especially the newly-arrived and the over-staying ones. Oftentimes, these questions lie suspended somewhere at the back of their minds, popping up anytime, yet, momentarily relieving them of other unnecessary thoughts.

What really goes on in OFWs’ mind or in their life in particular abroad with regard to the above situation? I will not go far this time as I would like to dissect my own thoughts and experiences, being an OFW myself. I strongly believe that my experiences, in general, hold true to the rest of the OFWs regardless of sex, workplace and kind of job. What a better way of stressing a point than by giving a true-to-life example, and a living one at that!

I remember asking the questions on the night I was to fly off to Kuwait. The date, to be exact, was November 11, 1987. It’s not that I didn’t ask the same questions (countless times, in fact) way before my initial departure. Of course, I was decided to go that day, although reluctantly, as I was leaving behind my two young sons, then aged four years 10 months and three years five months. The questions actually were triggered by an earlier knowledge of my status, and the two others leaving with me that night, as a worker leaving the Philippines for Kuwait. As per initial contract handed over by the recruiting agency manager to me right there at the POEA vicinity in Ortigas, my designation was a Nursing Aide with a salary of US\$350 a month!

Should I go or should I stay? Please take a moment and imagine yourself in my shoes. What would have you decided?

I did decide of course to go that night. Why, you may ask. For one, the manager gave his word that the contract was only for POEA’s record and that it will be changed as soon as we reach Kuwait. Same goes

with the salary, he added. Did he tell us the truth? Yes and no. The final contract I signed upon reaching Kuwait was as a Staff Nurse but the salary was the same! Except for a clause that it will be increased in three months' time. Not too good an incentive for a first-timer though!

Every night for a full three months I cried myself to sleep. I was terribly and miserably missing my children! Oftentimes, I would wake up with a heavy heart, so heavy and suffocating I really believed I would die any moment!

Those two familiar questions of course never left my waking thoughts. They popped up every time I thought about my children, which, sad to say, were very often. Those times were really difficult as I was adjusting at the same time to two major changes in my life – that of leaving my family, friends and a good job behind and that of working in a totally new and different set-up, not to mention staying in a far away and unheard of country of Kuwait itself.

My heart would always tell me to go but my brain would want me to stay. It was like doing something which you would rather not do and in the process of fighting you feel so helpless you tend to think the more of leaving and going home for good. Then in the end, you do otherwise. You stay.

There was that time when I nearly walked out of my job and decided to go for good. It happened during one of those menial works of feeding-bottle-washing. I was assigned permanently in the Nursery then after three months of probation. Before the end of any duty period, one or two staff nurses would be assigned alternately to wash the bottles.

It was a very busy day and my legs were tired from standing and running to and fro. I was at the same time worried about my children, about their father and about the scarcity of letters coming from home. There I was standing in front of the sink with two dozens and more bottles to wash. Halfway through, I suddenly thought about my situation. Why am I here? Why am I washing feeding bottles when back in the Philippines I have a maid who washes my own children's bottles? Why do I have to be shouted at by a bossy Indian head nurse when back in the Philippines I worked as head of an office with 11 staff members working at my beck and call? Why do I have to leave my children behind and suffer the pain and loneliness of being away from them? Why oh why? Countless questions yet all pointing to one very obvious answer – all for the need of a few hundred dollars! Or should I say all for the love of money!

But the painful truth is, I was not earning enough. What I earned then was barely coping up with the added expenses entailed from hiring of additional hands to look after my children for me. Not to mention my ex-husband's caprices – alcohol, gambling, barkada (gang) and women!

That night, after a crying session with one sympathetic friend, I again decided to stay.

A lot more similar incidents followed after that and the same questions of “should I go?” or “should I stay?” kept floating in the air. Each time, the second prevailed.

Eleven years on, with my children doing well in their studies back home and with their total acceptance of my newfound life in Kuwait living blissfully with a loving and responsible husband, the same opposing questions still pop up every now and then.

Should I go? or Should I stay?

Well, I would guess that those other overseas Filipino workers, and even those who have become official residents of the countries they work at, one way or another, have asked themselves the same questions. I believe that there will always be in our Filipino hearts that something which makes us want to go home for good.

Yes, we all stay in our workplace abroad because we are momentarily gainfully employed, but once we retire, should we not go?

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## **On Project OFW 2000**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: September 28, 1999

UNKNOWN to most Filipinos, there is an on-going movement to have Year 2000 declared by the Philippine Government as the “Year of Overseas Filipino Workers.” Dubbed as Project OFW 2000, it is spearheaded by the Philippines to the World Entertainment Foundation, Inc. (PWEFI), a non-stock, non-profit organization composed of Saudi-based Filipinos, their families and friends, along with ex-OFWs.

Project OFW 2000, basically, is a signature campaign launched early this year by PWEFI founding members in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. In April, it was made available on the World Wide Web, courtesy of Compass Internet (Project OFW 2000), in order to facilitate wider coverage and faster response. Through

the cyber version, Filipinos “signing in” were automatically and officially considered signatories of the campaign.

Sadly, before the project was even made known to majority of Filipino workers scattered all over the world, the signature campaign ended last August 15, 1999. It gathered 2,380 signatures from Australia, Canada, England, France, Hong Kong, Kuwait, Macau, New Zealand, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and the United States of America. Another 2,000 signatures were collected alone by the Filipino community in Qatar.

Organizers of the project, led by PWEFI founder Rhoel Raymundo Mendoza, managed to get the full support of popular figures in the Philippine Senate. Senator Loren Legarda-Leviste has actually filed before the Senate P.S. Resolution No. 508 “Urging President Joseph Ejercito Estrada to declare the year 2000 as the Year of Overseas Filipino Workers,” with Senator Juan Ponce Enrile as co-author. A similar resolution has been filed by Senator Rodolfo Biazon.

Letters of support were likewise received by the Foundation from Senators Juan Flavies, Sergio Osmena and Renato Cayetano. And this was after the organizers sent letters to all members of the Philippine Senate asking them to back Senator Legarda’s resolution.

Lately, no less than Senate President Blas Ople, himself, has penned down his signature in support of the drive. In the same manner, Department of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs Benjamin Domingo has signified his willingness to rally behind the undertaking.

Senator Legarda-Leviste, in her regular Manila Bulletin column published last September 15, noted the following:

“It is certainly important that our countrymen view our OFWs from a perspective that bestows upon them the respect and admiration that they deserve. Because of their talents and skills, they are lured overseas to perform tasks not normally made available to other nationalities because of the reputation that the Filipino worker has earned in the global market. Generally equipped with college degrees and a working knowledge of English, our OFWs easily blend into the mainstream of the societies that absorb them – be it in Europe, the Middle East or Asia.

While the OFWs value in the past has been based primarily on the revenues that they remit annually to pump up the economy, the attempt to raise them on a higher level of accomplishment is anchored on the initiative of the Philippines to the World Entertainment Foundation, Inc., and supported by legislative action on the part of the Senate. Once this proposal is implemented by the Estrada administration, this

will enhance the image of our OFWs and magnify their participation in the over-all scenario of the Philippines for the new millennium.”

There are only three months left before the year 2000 and PWEFI members are now busy campaigning for the realization of their worthy project. As signature campaign has long been concluded, they are now asking the support of OFWs worldwide to help them drumbeat the project by sending letters to the Presidential Palace and the mass media.

While the project is sound and timely called-for, it pains me to think that the initiative has to come from the overseas Filipinos themselves. It is not enough, it seems, that the OFWs have to labor hard in foreign countries – sacrificing their families along the way, they still have to work for their own glorification when in the first place, it should have been the government officials’ task to do so! After all, they were the ones who branded the OFWs as the New Heroes!

As an afterthought, granting that Year 2000 is indeed declared as OFW Year, what good will it do to us overseas Filipino workers? We may hear again from our friends at PWEFI.

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## **A tribute to an exceptional public servant**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: October 12, 1999

PHILIPPINE government officials or the so-called public servants are more often criticized than praised. This is so because of their public positions. They deal directly with people in all walks of life – people whom they were initially sworn to serve, supposedly, with sincere devotion and concern.

I need not prove why a lot of these public servants run short of praise and appreciation from the very people they serve. It is a known fact and each and every one of us overseas Filipino workers has experienced, at one point or another in our lives, being treated badly or indifferently by most of them both at home and abroad. If I were to take a random survey now and ask Filipinos of how they are treated by officials of Philippine embassies or consulates in their respective countries of work, majority, for sure, will answer as earlier claimed.



There are of course exceptions to this accepted notion and we sometime hear or read that this “so and so” public official has done this “so and so” exceptional deeds to people he or she serves. Very rare though and most often than not, these very few exceptional public officials are not even known or spoken of at all!

We should always give credit to whom it is due and it has actually been my practice in the many years of dealing with them, and at one point in my life of being one of them, to be appreciative of their every good deed or work performed. A kind word, after all, never hurts.

In Kuwait, where I am presently working, there is one public official who deserves all the credits and tributes one can ever offer. For indeed, in the past six years she has served her term of office, she not only performed her duties well as called by her position, she did even more than anyone could have ever achieved.

Welfare Officer Ofelia M. Castro is that one exceptional public servant this OFW-Suite101 now offers tribute to. I am not alone in doing this though. The Filipino Community in Kuwait, a few Philippine government officials and a number of people of varied nationalities whose lives she has touched, join me in giving appreciation to her outstanding work and unique persona. And just recently a special function was held in honor of her by prominent Filipino leaders and organization members in Kuwait, the first-of-its-kind ever given to an outgoing embassy official.

Assigned in 1993 by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) to oversee the affairs of Filipino workers in Kuwait, Ma’am Ofie, as she is fondly called by Filipinos and non-Filipinos alike, has exemplified what a true public servant should be.

Professionalism. Resourcefulness. Determination. Perseverance. Intelligence. Dedication. Tolerance. Courage. Compassion. These are just a few words that best describe Ms. Castro as she tackles her day-to-day functions as a Welfare Officer. She is strong in character and in dealing with her, you wouldn’t miss noticing it. You can never sway her from what she believes and thinks is right.

A fighter, no doubt Ms. Castro is, she will never stop until she gets what she aimed for. She is a strong defender of the many hapless Filipino workers, most especially of the domestic helpers who comprise the majority of Filipino workforce in Kuwait. She has never been slow in protecting a worker in times of trouble but fast, she always is, in reprimanding a Filipino who has gone wrong.

As a person, she is easy to get along with as she could be funny at times. She is very friendly and the kind who will never hesitate to offer a helping hand. Kind-hearted and a very forgiving person, she is a joy to be a friend. You will always count yourself lucky just to be acquainted with her.

Ms. Castro is a very endearing person, a character which has made her famous not only among her colleagues at the Philippine Embassy and the Filipinos in Kuwait but also among Kuwaiti officials she regularly deals with. She was instrumental in the present good relations the embassy people enjoy with Kuwait's labor and immigration officials. This was permanently sealed during her short stint in 1996-1997 as Acting Labor Attache. Where before cases would take ages to resolve, now, with her established professional relations with the proper authorities, cases are timely attended to.

I can go on describing Ma'am Ofie, and believe me, it's a task I can never get tired of doing but I would like this time to highlight what others say about her.

The previous head of Philippine mission to Kuwait, now Assistant Secretary Shulan O. Primavera (another example of an exceptional public servant) of the Office of the Middle East and African Affairs, has this to say of Ms. Castro:

"It has been my privilege to have worked with Ma'am Ofie for five of those six years. Those years, which could easily fit the Chinese description of "interesting times" saw the blossoming of the country-team approach in the Embassy's management of its multifaceted tasks. And Ma'am Ofie played a pivotal role in achieving that.

Using her dynamism, intelligence and charm, Ma'am Ofie cultivated a wide circle of friends composed of high Kuwaiti government officials, members of diplomatic corps and prominent local and expatriate businessmen. These contacts proved indispensable in resolving labor-related issues, promoting RP-Kuwait relations and enhancing the image of the Philippines and its community.

There is an Arabic saying which states that when the host offers incense, then it is time for the guest to leave. Were it not for an administrative rotation scheme in the home office, I am certain our Kuwaiti friends and host will never offer incense to Ma'am Ofie. Kuwait's loss will be Manila's gain."

Ambassador Sukarno D. Tanggol, the current head of mission in Kuwait, silently working to keep Ms. Castro in Kuwait beyond her allowable tour of duty, notes:

“Ms. Castro has been in Kuwait for almost six years – during which she has been able to establish close ties not only with the local Filipino community but also with authorities of the host government. She has shown initiative and leadership, two qualities which are essential in a Post like Kuwait which has a large concentration of Filipino nationals.

We, in the Embassy will miss her not only for her gregarious charm but also for her friendship and for the privilege of having worked with her during her tour of duty in Kuwait.”

From a friend, Cecille Pena Al Qenai, herself a prominent Filipino leader in Kuwait, the following is how she describes Ms. Castro:

“Ofelia Castro is a very dear friend, affectionate and caring in many ways. Her wit, humor and intellect are far broader than anyone can fathom. There are many occasions that proved her word is that of the wise and the learned. It is her warm friendship that I treasure most. Not to hear her girlish giggle, contagious laughter, feel the warm hug, taste her home-made meals (she’s an excellent cook) and most importantly feel her lively, down to earth presence in the coming weeks fill me with great sadness. To say I will miss her is an understatement.”

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## **A mother’s dream come true**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: October 26, 1999

PARENTS, as we all know, are supposed to stay always by their children’s side. While fathers go to work, mothers stay at home to look after the children. Our Filipino culture dictates this so. Lucky are those, indeed, whose circumstances in life allow this noble practice to be followed! Children get to live a normal, happy life, with both parents around to look after them.

Alas, such is not always the case in every Filipino family nowadays! Since the overwhelming success of the Philippine government’s new labor export strategy in the early 70s, more and more fathers have left their families behind to work abroad. And in the later part, mothers, as well, started to leave their husbands and children behind!

Stories abound relating to this phenomenon. Some are success and others are failure. I know a lot of success stories (not really that keen, I am, in dwelling into failures) – been into one, myself, but let me tell you of one which, I'm sure, you never heard of!

It is a story of a mother's struggle to fulfill her dream of seeing her children find success in life and of keeping them all together, at long last, with her!

Everybody calls her Manang Cristy. Her full name though is Crisanta dela Cruz. She is a short, frail-looking 58-year-old widow gifted with strong hands and nimble feet. She works in a house of one of the richest families in Kuwait. In short, she is a domestic helper, of which, she had been in the past 13 years.

Coming from a poor family, Manang Cristy, finished only secondary school. She married young and became a mother at the age of 19. By 23, she already had four children, three boys and a girl. Her late husband worked as a driver in a logging company.

Forced by the needs of her growing family, she tried her luck in applying for a domestic job abroad (recruiters were aplenty in her place then, she said) and in 1980, she went to Saudi Arabia. She stayed only for two years though because, as claimed, her children found it impossible to live with their drunkard father alone. A year after reuniting with her family, Manang Cristy finally convinced her husband to work abroad. So, in 1983, off he went to Saudi Arabia, courtesy of some roaming recruiters in their Northern Philippines province.

In 1986, Manang Cristy was again forced to leave her family behind because earlier that year, her husband was sent home, from Saudi Arabia, with half-body paralysis caused by a fatal heart attack. By then, two of her boys were in college. And with her husband unable to work, the more reason she had to go.

In the 13 years that Manang Cristy worked in Kuwait, she had the good opportunity of staying under one employ. Hard-working and patient, she was proven loyal, as well, by her employer, when in 1990, during the infamous Invasion of Kuwait by the neighboring Iraq, Manang Cristy chose to stay. The other Filipina maid working with her in the house at that time, immediately left Kuwait. Although encouraged by her male employer to leave the country as well, Manang Cristy stayed on because there was nobody to look after the three young children left behind by her lady employer. A few weeks before the invasion, her "Madam" went to America with the youngest child for treatment. The three other children, together with their father, were supposed to follow but were prevented from leaving Kuwait because of the invasion.

Endowed with a caring heart and a strong desire to help, Manang Cristy was one of the very few Filipinas who answered a call for volunteers by a private hospital nearby. In spite of her initial knowledge that there will be no sure monetary reward for the work she volunteered herself to do in the short-staffed hospital, she heeded the call and braved herself into countless sleepless nights. Her services rendered, along with the rest of the other Filipina domestic helpers who answered the call, proved vital in the continuity of hospital care to a number of Kuwaitis and other nationals during the Invasion.

Manang Cristy's selfless service during the Invasion, although not recognized significantly by the hospital she worked at, was nonetheless appreciated by her employers. Her salary, immediately after the Liberation, was doubled. The loyalty she showed was, likewise, rewarded by her employers' offer to help defray the expenses of her children's college education. And above all this, one by one, since 1991, Manang Cristy's four children followed her to Kuwait. The three boys are presently working in her employer's private company. Her only girl, who finished a Bachelor of Education degree, is now working as a Teacher's Assistant in one of the English playgroups in Kuwait. Herself, a widow at an early age, her only son, who was only a month old when his military father was ambushed, is now studying in a private British school, courtesy of Manang Cristy's employer.

And blessed of all blessed domestic helpers in the world, Manang Cristy sees her children and grandson everyday! They are all staying in a house provided by the kind-hearted employers, adjacent to their own. Had her husband lived long enough, he could have been with them as well!

How many Manang Cristys, do you think, dear readers, are there in the world? I sure would love to be one, wouldn't you?

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## **Pag-IBIG Fund, your way to owning a house**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: November 9, 1999

ONE of the reasons which drives a Filipino out of his country to venture into foreign land is the desire to earn more so he could build or buy a house. Majority of these overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), in fact, aim for a "dream" house and most, after three years or more of working abroad, will find themselves living in a place they can really call their own.

Depending on the income of a particular OFW, a house bought or built, could either be financed personally or financed by a lending institution. In the latter case, an OFW may need to face the obligation of repaying the housing loan taken for a number of years ensuing. As most of these workers earn more than their counterparts in the Philippines, they usually opt for the shortest period available for repayment. Once fully paid, a few others may even buy another house in a different place.

Now, among the OFWs themselves, there are those whose positions and salaries received are lower and lesser than the others. These workers either can't afford outright to buy or build a house on their own or qualify for a housing loan. As most of the lending institutions available to the OFWs before were leading banks in the Philippines, the more difficult it was for the low-income group to avail of a housing loan. This is no longer the case nowadays though and workers who earn less than US\$1,000 can now fulfill their dream of owning a house!

This is made possible through the Philippine government's Home Development Mutual Fund (HDMF), more popularly known as the Pag-IBIG Fund. Before the introduction to OFWs in the early 1990s, Pag-IBIG Fund was available only to both government and private employees in the Philippines. Created June 11, 1978, through Presidential Decree No. 1530, the Fund, since then, has gone through a number of changes, including a suspension during the time of President Corazon Aquino. Controversy was then focused on whether to make the fund mandatory or voluntary. This was eventually solved with Republic Act No. 7742, signed by President Fidel Ramos on June 17, 1994, making membership with the Fund mandatory for "all employees covered by SSS and GSIS and their respective employers."

In 1991, membership coverage was extended to the overseas Filipinos through the Fund's Filipino Overseas Workers (FilOW) Program, which is now more popularly known as Pag-IBIG Overseas Program (POP). It was first introduced in October 1991 in Rome, Madrid and Athens. It stood ground after it was launched in Hong Kong in January 1992 and as a result, a FilOW Task Force at the head office was created to oversee the activities and make necessary representations with pertinent government offices and financial institutions. By December 1992, Pag-IBIG Fund reached OFWs in the Middle East. Because of the increasing demands of members and would-be members, Fund representatives were sent to embassies and consulates abroad where there are large concentration of OFWs.

Membership to the Fund is voluntary for the OFWs. A minimum monthly contribution of US\$20 is set for those earning less than US\$1,000 and US\$40 for those drawing a salary of over US\$1,000. In order to avail of a housing loan, a member has to be a regular payee for at least six months and must have had 12 monthly contributions at the time of loan application. Those earning less than US\$1,000 can enjoy a loan of P250,000 while those earning more can borrow up to P500,000. Loan is payable either within a five-year or a ten-year period with an interest of 9% to 17% per annum, depending on the amount borrowed and time of repayment chosen.

The good thing about Pag-IBIG Fund is that your monthly contributions, which earn a 3% interest per annum, remain intact until the specified time of withdrawal. A member is given two options for payment: five and 10 years of monthly contributions. Regardless of whether you avail of a housing loan or not, or whether you continued with your monthly contributions or not, you'll be able to get your money at the end of your chosen period. It is just as you have saved your money in the bank and you will be happy to know that the contributions you've made have helped your co-OFW fulfill his or her cherished dream of owning a house!

I urge you strongly to enlist yourself as a member now and either fulfill your dream of owning a house or help others find the answer to their ardent prayers of going home one day to a house of their dream! I am a member, myself, and in fact, into my second membership already. Last April, I've finished five years of paying contributions to the Fund, although I didn't avail of any housing loan, and believe me, I got all the money, even more than I originally contributed for, and withdrawn at the time it was most needed! I again signed in this July as a member and opted for the same five years of payment and I am happy, knowing that I'll have something coming and that I'm helping others to realize their dream of one day owning a house.

If you need more information, do inquire at the nearest Philippine Embassy or Consulate in your area. A representative will be there to answer your questions or if none, some brochures or leaflets will be available for you to read and know more about the Pag-IBIG Fund.

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## **A dream turned into nightmare, Part 1**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: November 23, 1999

IN relation to my previous published article, I would like to relate a story of how I finally acquired a house. It is my wish to inform others of how much an OFW puts out "sweat and tears" just so he can own a modest house, out of his earnings from working abroad. A typical story, one OFW may claim, as I know, for sure, that others share with me similar experiences.

As I live in a countryside, with a land already owned as a birthright, I opted to construct a concrete house. This happened four years after I left home to work overseas. I wanted my house small and simple, just enough for my mother and my two children, with my old Nanny and a caretaker to comfortably live in. When I mentioned this to a local contractor, he managed, soon afterwards, to produce a simple yet

unique design of a house. Just as I wanted it, I remember telling the guy then! After agreeing on the total capital outlay, I then witnessed the start of the construction of my dream house!

Oh, how happy I was then, especially when, after two weeks, I saw the building, day by day, turning into a real house form! It was far from finished though and, while silently calculating on how far my budget could go and how near I was to go back to work, I convinced myself that I won't see my house finished, as promised by the contractor, that is.

You see, one of the conditions I initially gave to the contractor was for me to witness my house finished before I leave for work back to Kuwait again. No problem, he assured me then, as the house is programmed to finish in 45 days, he boasted! I had then 60 days leave and I readily agreed, confident at the same time that the money I had was enough to cover the budget he "intelligently calculated" to fully construct the house.

And now, with only a day left before I finally go back to Kuwait, my house, sans the finishing, was finally standing with blue-painted roofs over its square body. Alas, the contractor, although proven unreliable, was forgiven and given another chance! Another 10 days, he said, are needed to finally finish the house. He handed over to me another long list of materials and after producing everything he required and leaving behind a check to cover his final share (he already took, in advance, most of the money I was to pay him), off I went back to Kuwait.

Was the house finished after 10 days as promised by the contractor? A big NO! I found out a month later that the construction was completely stopped two days after I was gone. The remaining building materials slowly disappeared, as claimed by my mother, and whatever left of the cement bags turned hard as a rock and unusable! A few bags were salvaged and sold by my mother, at less than the original price, of course!

Anger and frustration were the two strongest emotions I felt then. Cursing has never been my way when dealing with people but I do remember uttering bad words to the contractor, first, by my own self, after learning his betrayal, and afterwards, personally, to the contractor himself, when I went for my holiday a year after. It was unwise of me (or should I say stupid?) not to demand, initially, an official written contract. So, no matter how loud and demanding my commands were, there was really nothing I could do to make the contractor finish his job. How I wish then that the man could be eaten alive by a monster!

What happened then to my house? I knew you will ask that question. Well, that's another story – Part 2 – which I will relate in my next article. To somehow prepare you for the next interesting story, but irritating experience on my part though, I am including herewith a copy of a letter I sent through email



last August. The first mail was sent directly through “Isumbong Mo Kay Erap” sub-section of the Office of the President’s web site. Up to this writing, I still didn’t receive any answer. Here’s the full text of that letter:

Dear Mr. President,

Warm greetings from Kuwait!

This is now my second letter asking for help – of the same nature.

I was, and still am, seeking your assistance in helping me get my money back (nearly P60,000.00) from the V.V. Soliven Group of Companies. Said money was in payment (partial) of a house and lot located at Greenheights, Phase IV, Marikina City. After the amount was paid (way back in 1995), no house was built for me, as agreed with the company, after meeting my initial down payment. As a result, I withdrew my application for the purchase of the house and lot.

I am an OFW and I work hard to give the best for my family. And then I was swindled by this company and you should understand that being away from my country, I feel helpless and lost!

Last July 19, 1999, I personally visited the company to demand a refund of the money. I was asked to submit some papers and promised a refund, in parts, as soon as the papers were submitted.

It’s nearly a month now but according to my sister (Mrs. Evelyn C. Santiago, who’s my Attorney-In-Fact), the company is giving her a hard time.

My problem might be small compared to those you receive everyday, but, believe me, for an OFW like me, it is very big! I hope you understand my situation.

Looking forward to your assistance and thanking you in advance, I am

Freda Editha O. Contreras

I also would like to pass on the following question:

How many times does a person get fooled or swindled in a lifetime before he finally gets what he wants?

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## **A dream turned into nightmare, Part 2**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: December 7, 1999

IF at first you don't succeed, try and try again. . . . So goes a familiar line of a favorite childhood song. Words well remembered that they have forever left a mark in my brain!

Life, indeed, is a continuous struggle and one fall should not discourage us to stand up and try again. But how many falls or setbacks, do you think, a person may take in a lifetime, before he or she finds success?

I once heard that a man's success is measured by his failures. The more failures he gets the greater and sweeter his success will be! Are these wise sayings true? Allow me, please, to continue with my story and you may find the answer to this question.

After having been drained in one go of all the savings and resources I ever mustered in my first four years of working abroad, I felt ready to venture into more unforeseen "failures" in the year 1995. It was three years since my dream of building a house turned into nightmare. After that showdown with the contractor, I didn't attempt at all to re-start the construction of my unfinished house. I just left the building untouched and it was quite strange because I felt that the edifice itself had betrayed me. I did not even want to see it at all!

In June 1994, I was forced to transfer the guardianship over my two young boys from my mother to my sister. My mother, early that year, developed a fatal heart ailment and she almost died. So, from the province, off went my children and their nanny to my sister's place in Marikina, Metro Manila.

When I went for my yearly December holiday that year, I talked to my sister and her husband about my plan of buying a house and lot near the rented apartment they were occupying. I thought then to avail of a housing loan from Pag-IBIG Fund, of which I initially became an overseas member in February 1994.

The plan finally took form only in April 1995. With all Pag-IBIG Fund paper requirements ready from my side, I sent the full amount of money to my brother-in-law, being my Attorney-In-Fact, to be paid to V.V. Soliven for the required down payment of a single, detached 2-bedroom bungalow. Confident that all was well at my brother-in-law's end, I sent the first equity payment by end-May.

In early July, I needed to go to Manila for a very important personal matter. It was my good chance, as well, to see the house I recently bought. Well, nearly bought, as the Realty company was then in the process of getting the P500,000.00 from the Pag-IBIG Fund. And with the down payment plus the first equity payment already received and acknowledged by the company, I was assured of a more comfortable dwelling place for my children and my sister and her family. Oh, how excited I was then and I even included in my hectic itinerary a visit to the manager to personally hand over at the same time my second and third equity payments!

The bad thing about the whole frustrating scenario was that I was not prepared at all of what was coming. My brother-in-law, sad to say, turned out neglectful of his duties I legally and trustfully delegated to him. I found out later on that he was misinformed, himself, by the agent, of what to expect from the company after meeting the down payment and the first equity payment.

Oh yes, I went to the site first thing in the morning following my late afternoon arrival in Manila. And what did I see? A vacant lot full of tall weeds (talahib)! From there I went straight to the manager and demanded an explanation for the company's failure to construct the house as per signed contract's specifications. I was informed that a problem with the developers ensued but was nearly resolved. Your house, they said, will immediately be constructed as soon as the problem is sorted out!

Somehow feeling that something really messy was going on in the company, I verbally announced my intention to withdraw from buying the house and lot. I was then played around by three positioned personnel – cajoled, conjured, consoled, you name it – and in the end, poor, innocent me, was finally convinced to give them a little more time and the house will soon be finished!

From Zamboanga City, where my original purpose of travel that July was meant to be accomplished, I passed by Antique, en route back to Manila, to see my recuperating mother. I then saw my unfinished house and seeing its near-dilapidated condition, coupled with a strong desire to provide a more comfortable place for my mother and my old nanny, I decided, then and there, to resume construction of the building. A relative contractor, who was previously frequenting my mother, was right away contacted. As I am a naturally trusting person, I again entered into another contract, this time, in black and white form. On the day I was to leave, I left the guy cash covering 20% of the first 50% of the total amount needed to finish the house. I also issued two checks and handed them over to him in exchange of official receipts. The first check, which covered 80% payment of the first 50% was postdated 10 days from the day I left – just enough time for me, I thought then, to deposit money in my PNB account. The

other check, which covered the full 50% of the total, was undated. He can only encash the check upon completion of the house and on confirmation by my younger sister that the house was indeed completely finished as specified in the contract.

By mid-October, I received a fax message from my sister confirming that the house was finished. Immediately, I sent the money to my account to fund the second check issued and personally given two months earlier to the contractor.

You may ask me then: was the house completely finished? You guessed it right, my dear readers. NO, it wasn't!

Why, oh, why? This was what and why it happened: the new contractor, who was supposed to help me, he, being a cousin of mine, swindled me instead. He managed to convince my sister to give her confirmation reasoning out that he recently lost in his business and had no cash in hand to use in buying the needed materials to finish the construction of my house. Without the money, how then can he finish my house? Another trusting and stupid person as I am, my sister was even easier to convince! After the bad guy encashed the check, he never showed his face in our vicinity.

What did I do then? Contract and receipts in hand, I verbally attacked the guy and demanded that he might as well finish the house or he'll end up in jail! This happened during my scheduled holiday in mid-December of 1996. I intended then to have the house blessed and at the same time offer thanksgiving for my mother's complete recovery from her heart ailment. Sans the balcony's fine-finishing, which, believe me, until now the contractor never completed, my house was finally blessed, two days before I went back to Kuwait!

At long last, my long-cherished dream of keeping my mother, my children and my old nanny together living comfortably in a modest house, was finally fulfilled!

But let me just ask you one last time: will I ever get back the money I paid to V.V. Soliven? Well, your guess is as good as mine.

Author's Note: I did receive a refund in the total amount of P24,000 only, which, was paid by installments at P2,500 a month commencing in December 2004.

# OFWs are now covered by Medicare

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: December 21, 1999

ANOTHER program implemented by the Philippine government for its estimated six million or so overseas workers, is the Medical Care (Medicare) Program for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Mandated by Executive Order No. 195, signed August 13, 1994 by then President Fidel V. Ramos, the health care scheme aims to provide medical assistance and hospitalization benefits to OFWs and their dependents. Coverage is compulsory. Any OFW leaving the country is required to register as a member and is asked to pay a yearly contribution of P900.00 (equivalent roughly to US\$25). The only exception is when an OFW is an active member of either the Social Security System (SSS) or the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS), as both cover medical insurance scheme for its members.

Four major government entities – Department of Health, Department of Labor and Employment, Department of Foreign Affairs and the SSS – jointly implement the program but the main task is currently faced by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), which provided the seed money to start the operations. There is a plan though that in a few years' time, the government-owned and controlled Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) will take over the full implementation of the program for OFWs. Just recently, PhilHealth took over from GSIS and SSS the Medicare coverage of over a million government employees and about five million private sector employees.

As members, OFWs are entitled to a 45-day compensable confinement in an accredited hospital in a given year. Their legal dependents are likewise provided with another 45 days to be shared among themselves within a year. Legal dependents, as defined by OWWA, are the OFW's legitimate spouse who is not a Medicare member; the unmarried and unemployed children, including legitimated or acknowledged as appearing in the birth certificate, as well as those legally adopted or stepchildren below 21 years; minor children who are suffering from congenital disability, either physical or mental, or any disability acquired that renders them totally dependent upon the members for support; and parents who are over 60 years old whose income is less than P1,000 a month.

Once availed of by either or both the OFW and his dependents, expenses for room and board, medicines, X-rays and laboratory examinations, professional fees, operating room fees and surgical family planning procedures will be paid in part by the Medicare program. This is done once a beneficiary presents the original or a certified copy of the Medicare Eligibility Certificate (MEC) to the hospital. The MEC, which is initially issued to an OFW upon membership, is valid only for a year and once authenticated by the hospital, it will then be attached to the claim form. Before discharge, the hospital deducts the Medicare benefit from the total hospital bill before payment.

Benefits are calculated according to the category of the hospital, classified into primary, secondary or tertiary confinement. For room and board, for example, Medicare will pay P120/day, P220/day and P345/day for primary, secondary and tertiary confinement, respectively. Drugs and other medicines could be covered up to nearly P12,000, if confined in a tertiary hospital and if the case is classified as catastrophic. Medicine benefits under Intensive cases is set at P2,430 minimum and up to P7,660 maximum. Under professional fees, Medicare can pay as much as P15,930 for a surgeon's service rendered. For a complete list of Medicare benefits and other relevant information, please refer to the (OWWA-MEDICARE) site.

In its effort to provide more and better services to OFWs and their dependents, OWWA has recently launched its out-patient service, provided free of charge. It features free consultation, free routine and laboratory examination and free health education and counseling. This is conducted every Friday at the OWWA Center and at various Regional OWWA Units in the Philippines. The service is also now available at the Filipino Workers Resource and Development Center (FWRDC) in Tokyo, Osaka, Dubai, Abu-Dhabi, Rome, Jeddah and Bahrain. There is an on-going plan to provide the same free services to the rest of OFWs scattered all around the globe.

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## **Y2K marks century-old Philippine labor migration**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: January 4, 2000

ONE hundred years ago, the first group of Filipino workers left the Philippines for Hawaii. They were two hundred in all and soon were followed by thousands more until they formed about 70 percent of Hawaii's plantation labor. This was according to a Primer on Philippine Labor Migration prepared by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

Officially, labor migration in the Philippines began in 1900. The nearby Hawaii was then experiencing severe manpower shortage. The few hundreds who initially left the Philippines turned into thousands within a span of five years. The majority made Hawaii their second home and became permanent residents. Shortly thereafter, Filipinos were sent to California as apple and orange pickers. It's there where the Filipinos gained a reputation as "fruit pickers".

In 1946, Filipinos became in demand as construction workers and laborers in Guam, Okinawa and the Wake Islands as a result of the just-concluded World War II. The US military stations were then in immediate need of rehabilitation and construction. And when both the Korean and Vietnam wars broke out later, the Filipino workers were again institutionalized in the US defense and civilian projects.

As early as the '60s, quite a number of Filipinos were hired as medical workers in the USA, Canada and Australia. The nurses, as early as then, formed the most-numbered of all medical manpower sent by the Philippines abroad. Filipino laborers, at about the same time, were sent to Borneo, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia when these Asian nations opened their labor market in construction and logging.

Although the Philippine government's overseas employment program reached its high peak in the early 1970s because of the manpower shortage in oil-rich Middle East countries, Filipinos, were hired by the thousands as early as 1969. From 3,694 deployed workers in 1969, as recorded by DOLE, the number reached almost half a million by 1983. The majority of the workers were then sent to the Middle East, particularly in Saudi Arabia. This was complemented by the increasing demand for service workers, particularly domestic helpers, in Europe, Canada, Hong Kong and Singapore.

It is a known fact that of all labor host countries, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is number one in terms of Filipino workforce hiring. According to POEA statistics, a total of 2,012,800 Filipino contract workers were absorbed by KSA alone from 1984 to 1993.

Asia, however, particularly the region's newly industrialized countries (NICs), has lately become a major labor market for Filipinos. Hong Kong (which is still the Philippines' biggest labor market in Asia), Singapore and Malaysia are continuously opening employment opportunities for skilled and professional workers. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, as early as 1990s, have also opened their doors to Filipino overseas workers for both skilled and unskilled workers. To date, Taiwan, since it started hiring Filipinos in late 1991, is fast becoming a major destination for OFWs because of its proximity and attractive salary.

Today, there are nearly seven million OFWs spread in 181 countries worldwide. The following are excerpts on Philippine Overseas Migration from a paper, prepared by KAKAMMPI (Association of Filipino Migrant Families and Returnees) for the Southeast Asian Regional Conference on Migrant Workers and the Asian Economic Crises: Towards a Trade Union Position, held November 5-6, 1998 in Bangkok, Thailand:

"Among Asian countries, the Philippines has emerged, as the biggest sender of workers for overseas employment, out-stripping India, Pakistan and China. Government statistics place annual departures at about 700,000 for both land- and sea-based workers. Today, there are nearly seven million overseas Filipino workers spread in 181 countries and destinations worldwide. They now constitute about 10% of

our population or nearly 20% of our productive age population. Of these, 4.2 million are classified as overseas contract workers (OCWs) who work on fixed terms of six months to two years. Philippine overseas migration has become a pair of crutches for the local economy, serving two main objectives – to ease the unemployment situation and to generate foreign incomes to fuel the faltering economy.”

As people become more and more aware of the “enforced” role the OFWs play for their country, there is now an accepted reality: OFWs ARE HERE TO STAY!

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## **SSS now covers OFWs**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: March 7, 2000

COGNIZANT of every individual’s need for social security protection and in line with its mandate to embrace every working Filipino, the Social Security System (SSS), one of the Philippines’ top performing agencies, is now providing coverage to overseas Filipino workers. OFWs may now register as voluntary members and those who were already members before going abroad but stopped paying their monthly contributions, may readily reactivate their membership without having to pay for arrears.

As the service is new, OFWs who may benefit from the coverage are only those working at the countries where the current nine offices opened by SSS are located. These offices are in Brunei, Hong Kong, Rome in Italy, Jeddah and Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, Kaohsiung and Taipei in Taiwan, Kuwait and Greece. More offices will be opened as time and resources permit and it is envisioned that all foreign countries where there are large concentrations of OFWs will be serviced. As it is, plans are already underway to extend social security coverage in Tokyo, Singapore, Al-Khobar in Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi and Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, and Milan in Italy by putting up offices in these areas this year.

In a press release accessed through the SSS’ website “<http://www.sss.gov.ph/>”, it was learned that when SSS Chairman and President Carlos Arellano officially announced last year its new program, an estimated 200,000 OFWs were initially expected to join the SSS as voluntary members. During its information and coverage campaign last year among OFWs in few selected countries, SSS managed to collect contributions totaling to P1.44 million remitted through the SSS auto-debit arrangement program and close to \$480,000 paid over-the-counter and through banks. By mid-July, some 19,500 OFWs were already registered as voluntary members! I would say that the SSS underestimated the number of OFWs worldwide. In the Philippines, there are 20.16 million SSS members, the report noted.



“By being active-paying members of the SSS, OFWs and their beneficiaries can be assured of receiving benefits for sickness, maternity, retirement, disability and death as well as enjoying loan privileges for housing and other purposes,” SSS Chairman Arellano said in the report.

SSS offices abroad are now receiving and processing applications for membership as well as receiving claims for benefits. Members are being provided with the new tamper-proof and machine-readable identification cards available only momentarily at the Hong Kong, Kaohsiung and Taipei SSS representative offices. In June, the ID service will be made available in Kuwait.

Kuwait’s SSS foreign representative Danilo Q. Calape, in a recent interview, has provided OFW-Suite101 the following additional information in a question and answer form:

1. WHO ARE THOSE COVERED WITH THE OFW PROGRAM? Those Overseas Filipino workers who are not yet 60 years old and are: a) Not yet SSS members; b) Previously SSS member and separated from employment and has not applied as voluntary paying member and those who are already voluntary members and are remitting contributions but not as OFW.

2. WHEN IS THE EFFECTIVITY OF THE COVERAGE OF OFW? Your coverage with the SSS as OFW will take effect on the payment of your first monthly contribution.

3. WHAT ARE THE DOCUMENTS REQUIRED? Secure an SSS form OW-1 or Overseas Worker Record Form from your SSS Representative and submit the photocopy of the following: a) Birth or Baptismal certificate or Passport; b) Marriage certificate if married; c) Birth certificate of children if with children. You must bring the original copies of the above-mentioned documents for authentication.

4. WHAT IS THE BASIS OF YOUR CONTRIBUTION? The amount of your monthly contribution will be based on the monthly salary that you declare upon registration. Your monthly salary should not be lower than P3,000 and the maximum is P12,000.00. The amount of contribution is equivalent to 8.4% of your monthly income.

5. WHEN AND WHERE DO YOU PAY YOUR CONTRIBUTIONS? You may pay your contributions not later than the fifth day of the month following the applicable month at whatever designated exchange center or bank in the country where you are presently working.

Asked as to his message to the OFWs worldwide, Mr. Calape has the following to say:

“Now is the time for you to save for your family while you are still earning.”

A very sound and practical advice indeed!

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## 2000 is ‘Year of OFWs’

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: April 4, 2000

IT is now official – 2000 is “Year of OFWs”! At long last, the relentless efforts of those concerned have finally borne fruit with the penning of his signature by President Joseph “Erap” Ejercito Estrada of Proclamation No. 243, “Declaring Year 2000 as the Year of Overseas Filipino Workers in Recognition of Determination and Self-Sacrifice of Overseas Filipino Workers.” Although signed February 8, the declaration was officially announced by the Presidential Palace only on February 29, 2000.

Credit goes to Philippines to the World Entertainment Foundation, Inc. (PWEFI), which, as mentioned in a previously published article here on OFW-Suite101 site (On Project OFW 2000), initiated last January 1999 a signature campaign among OFWs, urging the Philippine government to declare year 2000 as “Year of OFWs.”

Just a few weeks prior to the signing of Proclamation No. 243, PWEFI founding leader Rhoel R. Mendoza issued an update addressed to all signatories and known supporters of the signature campaign. In an introductory message, Mendoza wrote the following: “Perhaps I need not tell you that our campaign has not produced positive results, not yet; otherwise, you would have heard by now that 2000 has indeed been declared as OFW Year. However, we at the PWEFI are not giving up and we hope neither are you. It is, after all, just the beginning of the year. Besides, if the declaration is not made soon, we can always bat for year 2001. This report is meant to inform the signatories on what had transpired during the past months in connection with our signature campaign and to assure those who supported the project that the Foundation never faltered in its efforts and that it hasn’t given up to make OFW Year a reality”

It is indeed commendable the work that has been done by PWEFI officials and members. Aware of the system in the government, they deemed it necessary to get the support of popular figures in the Philippine Senate and prominent officials of some major government agencies. When the signatures

were finally collected at the end of the campaign in August 1999, PWEFI chose to submit and entrust those to Senator Loren Legarda, who subsequently penned Senate Resolution No. 508 urging President Estrada to declare year 2000 as OFW Year. Said resolution was co-authored by Senator Juan Ponce Enrile. A similar resolution, it may be recalled, was also filed by Senator Rodolfo Biazon.

Mendoza likewise mentioned in the update that the Foundation received letters from Senators Juan Flavio, Miriam Defensor-Santiago, Sergio Osmena and Renato Cayetano expressing their support to the resolutions and the campaign. Sometime in October, PWEFI received an e-mail from Mr. Emmanuel Tatad, Secretary of the Senate Committee on Labor, Employment & Human Resources Development which is chaired by Sen. Francisco Tatad, informing that "they were studying the possibility of these being taken up by the Senate without the benefit of public hearings in order to expedite the adoption of the resolutions." Mendoza also noted the following:

"The last communication we received (in December) were from Sen. Legarda giving us the assurance that they do not cease in the campaign for the Year 2000 to be declared as OFW Year. The other was from Presidential Spokesperson, Jerry Barican, endorsing the campaign to Sec. Jose Jaime C. Policarpio, Presidential Adviser for Legislative Affairs and Head of the Presidential Legislative Liaison Office, for his consideration and appropriate action. (It must be noted that despite several letters posted, faxed and e-mailed to President Estrada himself, we never received a single reply from him. We would like to think that the office of Executive Secretary Ronnie Zamora which, we understand, screens everything for the President is the one to blame, not Erap himself. Otherwise, it will send a very ugly message to OFWs as to how the President really regards OFWs.)"

True to his pronouncement that PWEFI will pursue the campaign relentlessly, Mendoza declared that his group initiated the project "not only because we believe OFWs deserve the honor of having an entire year dedicated to them but more so because the token declaration could be the start of much better things for OFWs."

I would like to share the full text of what PWEFI has aimed for the Year 2000 (and beyond) so OFWs would be aware of what to expect and for them to be able to do their share in support and observance of the Year of OFWs.

Among the things that PWEFI intends to pursue this year are:

1. Push for the passing of the absentee voting bill so that we can start exercising our right of suffrage, hopefully, in the 2001 elections.

2. Urge the government to establish a one-stop office or agency (under the appropriate department) for OFWs wishing to go into business – an agency that would assist them from preparing feasibility studies to securing loans to actual start-up.

3. Urge OWWA to launch an extensive information campaign so that OFWs are really aware of their benefits.

4. Suggest to the Department of Education a nationwide information campaign that would educate the youth about the pros and cons of labor migration, the contributions of OFWs to the Philippine economy, the effects of labor migration on the Filipino family, etc. (or better still, suggest the incorporation of such within the appropriate school subject.)

Moreover, the Foundation submitted to the office of Sen. Legarda in July last year several other suggestions. During a meeting between Sen. Legarda's legislative staff and DFA Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo (who is in charge of OFW Affairs), this list was, in turn, given to the latter who was reportedly excited over the declaration of OFW Year and was very receptive to the groups' suggestions which included the following:

- \* Philippine embassies and consulates must be required to have 24-hour hotlines which OFWs could call when they get into trouble. This way, even those who are jailed for very minor offenses are immediately attended to.

- \* OFWs must be urged to inform the embassy immediately whenever they hear about kababayans being arrested and jailed so that appropriate action could be taken immediately.

- \* Our diplomatic missions should seek the assistance of community organizations which would be willing to act as monitoring groups for domestic helpers (DHs). These groups must be given authority by the Embassy to call on a regular basis employers of Filipina housemaids and to speak with the housemaids themselves in order to find out if all is well with them. Contracts of employment should then have a provision stipulating this arrangement. This special focus on domestic helpers stems from the fact that among the different sectors of OFW communities, these women are the most vulnerable to abuse. Aside from that, once they arrive in the Kingdom (or any other country for that matter) and the moment they enter their employers' home, they are, in a manner of speaking, kept under lock and key and they virtually lose touch with the "outside world." No one, therefore, knows what happens to them inside. Just imagine if they are your mothers or sisters. Would you be able to sleep knowing that their situation makes them prone to abuse or maltreatment?

\* Ambassadors and consuls must hold once-a-week (or even once-a-month) dialogues with their respective OFW communities

encouraging the ordinary OFWs (and not only “community leaders” and “prominent members of the community”) to attend. This is the sector of the community that is “heard and seen” less often. The embassy should attend more to, and encourage more participation from, this under-represented sector.

\* Recruitment and placement agencies must be mandated to post at least one representative in critical OFW destinations to look after their deployed workers.

On the lighter side and in perfect consonance with the Foundation’s objective of utilizing the power of media and entertainment in promoting the welfare and well-being of OFWs, PWEFI intends to do the following:

\* Urge producers of TV drama anthologies (such as “Maalaala Mo Kaya”) to focus more on storylines dealing with OFWs’ lives, and producers of talk shows to tackle more OFW issues during the special year.

\* Ask the leading broadsheets (Inquirer, Philippine Star, The Manila Bulletin, etc.) to come up with an OFW page at least once a month.

\* Ask the Metro Manila Film Festival Committee to include ‘OFW theme’ in their criteria for the December 2000 festival.

And as a first step in striving to have the modern-day heroes recognized and honored – immortalized, if you will – PWEFI has written Postmaster General, Nicasio Rodriguez, petitioning for the issuance of a special OFW stamp. The Foundation also proposed that, should this request be approved, a stamp design competition be organized by PWEFI.

Finally, PWEFI wrote Jaime Cardinal Sin to explore the possibility of issuing a pastoral letter about the plight of OFWs. The suggestion was for the letter to be read during a Sunday mass (supposedly sometime in December). Likewise, as it is our belief that even deceased OFWs deserve to be part of the celebration of OFW Year, it was suggested further that – with the help (again) of fellow OFWs – we collect as many names of deceased OFWs as we could. The list of names is to be submitted to the appropriate entity which, in turn, will distribute the list to all churches nationwide so that masses and/or prayers could be offered for the deceased OFWs during the entire month of December. His Eminence referred the matter to Bishop Arguelles of the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrant Workers and Itinerant People under the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). This will also be pursued with

vigor. The Flor Contemplacions of this world must not be buried into oblivion, even they should be a part of the OFW Year celebrations.

We can even request The Filipino Channel to prepare an interstitial for All Saints Day wherein they could flash pictures of the deceased OFWs (and their names) while prayer is being delivered, asking the viewers to light candles and to pray. This is similar in concept to TFC's "Bandila at Kandila: Lighting of the Centennial Candles Ceremony" in 1998 (which was, likewise, suggested by the Foundation).

NOW that Year 2000 has finally been declared as OFW Year, let us all do our share. Let us keep in mind and try to glean some truth in what the PWEFI members believe, which, lastly, is quoted below:

And what are OFWs asking for in return? Not much. In fact, OFWs do not necessarily want to be treated as heroes. Not VIPs even. They don't even need the government to be grateful. They merely want to feel cared for and properly attended to. And what is PWEFI asking for? Not much either. Just a token declaration... Just an "OFW YEAR." A special year that is hoped to improve the lot of OFWs, get more things moving for their welfare and benefit, and make them more "visible and audible." And all these could become reality without so much effort on the part of the government. Just a simple act of picking up a pen and signing for the declaration. Not much really. After all, it is for the very people who do not only contribute to the economic well-being of our country and to the development of their host countries but who serve as conduits of Philippine culture, customs and traditions. People who serve as showcases of everything good that we have to offer the world. People who, by being such, contribute to the globalization of the Filipino and, in a large sense, to the Filipinization of the globe.

And that is the worth of OFWs.

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## **On Gulf War comp claims**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: May 2, 2000

WHAT I am going to present here is of a very sensitive nature. It particularly concerns the compensation deemed worthy for payment by the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) to thousands of Filipinos affected by the 1990-1991 Invasion of Kuwait. I know that I am not an authority to discuss the subject but being a victim myself of the recently discovered irregularities involving high ranking officials

of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in the distribution of the fund, I feel obliged to share the information I painstakingly gathered in my search for truth.

From the time I submitted my claim papers to the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait in May 1992 up to the present, I have patiently waited and religiously followed up the payments. In early 1995 I was privileged to get hold of confidential papers from the UN when I wrote about the upcoming first ever payment by UN to a few hundred Filipino claimants. This happened during the time I was maintaining a special two-page section "Pinoy News" in Kuwait Times, one of the only two English dailies in Kuwait. I was then actively working hand-in-hand with the Philippine Embassy officials, headed by Ambassador Shulan O. Primavera (now head of Middle Eastern and African Affairs, DFA, Manila) in disseminating information to Filipinos in Kuwait and the Gulf. In April 1996, I was again entrusted with confidential papers by Ambassador Primavera containing full information, including names, of all 45 Filipinos given payment by the UN under Category B claims. The story I wrote then was published on the front page of the maiden issue of "Pinoy Expat News" or PEN, the first independent Filipino newspaper established in Kuwait and the Gulf. In February 1998, I got hold of another set of pertinent papers from the UN containing names of nearly 2,000 claimants earlier approved for payment. The story appeared in the third and last issue of Eye Catcher's Pinoy News. It turned out to be the last story ever written about the UN claims as far as the Filipinos are concerned. It was not because I ceased writing and publishing newspapers in Kuwait neither because of unavailability of press media – it was simply because the Philippine government officials refused to divulge any more information!

The embassy officials in Kuwait even refused around that time to give out names, as they used to, each time concerned Filipinos inquired after reading in the local papers about a UN-disseminated general information on recent payments made. They reasoned that they were no longer supplied with the list of approved-for-payment names. They were given instead an order from Manila to inform those who approach the embassy to inquire directly at the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat. I particularly remember approaching Welfare Officer Ofelia M. Castro sometime in July that year to find out if my name was included among those recently approved for payment by the UN. She showed me a copy of a fax message from Manila dated June 24, 1998 and I'm quoting the full text here, as follows:

"REUR REQUEST TO FURNISH YOU WITH UNCC-APPROVED LIST OF 3RD BATCH CATEGORY "A" GULF WAR CLAIMS. PLS. BE ADVISED THAT WE ARE NOT AUTHORIZED BY DFA TO DISSEMINATE SAID LIST.

YOU CAN THEREFORE NOTIFY CONCERNED OFWS TO DIRECT THEIR FOLLOW-UPS/QUERIES TO THE PHILIPPINE CLAIMS AND COMPENSATION COMMITTEE (PCCC), DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, PASAY CITY. ALL RECORDS ARE CENTRALIZED AT THE PCCC SECRETARIAT."

When asked why the list of successful claimants was no longer available for viewing by the public, the embassy officials I talked to then explained that they were trying to curtail illegal activities of some “fixers” who as alleged, had victimized quite a number of claimants. Said fixers, after getting hold of names approved for payment, can actually claim the checks after presenting forged papers, they said. As of this writing, I still have to encounter an actual case of those fixers’ activities – if there really is such!

For the information of those who are not aware of the anomalies committed by the officials who are supposed to be protecting the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), below are selected news captions I came across while doing my research.

“DFA exec involved in Gulf War fund scandal faces ax. . . Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo allegedly has a bank account under his name for \$863,000 (roughly P34.5 million), consisting of bank interests of Gulf War payments remitted to the Philippine government by the United Nations and deposited with the Philippine National Bank (PNB). Domingo reportedly gained access to the money through his appointment as chief of Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee (PCCC) tasked to oversee the proper disposition of the funds. Siazon said Domingo has made three withdrawals totaling \$60,000 from the account. The inquiry on the Gulf War fund mess also covered Philippine Ambassador to Indonesia Leonides Caday, Domingo’s predecessor at the Office of the Legal Assistant for Migrant Workers Affairs (OLAMWA), which handles the proper disposition of the Gulf War payments.” – by Aurea Calica, The Philippine Star.

“Release Gulf War claims. . . Senate President Blas Ople is urging the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to facilitate the payment of some P34.5 million in Gulf War claims which a DFA official, he said, has allegedly kept in a bank deposit to earn interest. Ople said the fund was released by the United Nations to the Philippine government through the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee (PCCC). He said Foreign Affairs Secretary Domingo Siazon has directed the DFA official to go on leave after initial reports showed that the Gulf War fund has, indeed, been earning interest in the personal account of the official. “I don’t see any reason why such a huge account could accumulate if there is a conscious effort to immediately distribute the war claims payment to their respective beneficiaries,” Ople said.” – by Perseus Echeminada, The Philippine Star.

“Diplomats worried over picket at DFA . . . Foreign diplomats expressed concern over prolonged demonstrations at the Department of Foreign Affairs, saying these were hampering normal operations of the DFA. Members of the militant group Migrante International have been camping there since Wednesday to denounce the alleged ineptitude of the Estrada administration and the DFA in addressing the concerns of overseas Filipino workers — the so-called modern-day heroes. Migrante members are demanding the resignation of President Estrada, DFA Secretary Domingo Siazon Jr. and DFA Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Benjamin Domingo for Domingo’s opening of a separate interest account for Gulf War compensation funds in the Philippine National Bank. This, even after Siazon and Domingo assured OCWs that principal Gulf War funds were not affected by the interest account under



the name of the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee with Domingo as sole signatory.” – by Aurea Calica, The Philippine Star.

“Calls mount for resolution of Gulf War fund mess. . . Clamor for a speedy resolution of the Gulf War fund scandal mounted as various sectors feared that the mess would delay compensation for the victims who have been waiting for it for the past 10 years. Some 100 Gulf War victims, joined by supporters from the militant group Migrante, picketed the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) offices in Pasay City yesterday to demand the immediate release of their claims and the ouster of DFA officials involved in the scandal. Earlier, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines’ (CBCP) Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and the Overseas Filipino Workers’ sector at the House of Representatives also voiced out serious concern over the alleged misuse of the funds. This developed even as President Estrada ordered a full-dress investigation into the fund mess involving the allegedly irregular deposit and withdrawal of interest earnings of the Gulf War payments. Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo, who heads the Office of Legal Assistant and Migrant Workers’ Affairs, was cited as having deposited the interest earnings of the funds under his own name. Domingo admitted that the Philippines has been delayed in settling the claims of the war victims, and that the United Nations has already directed the DFA to speed up processing of the claims.” – by Aurea Calica, The Philippine Star.

“Ople urges Senate probe on delayed payment of ‘Gulf war’ claims. . . When the Senate resumes regular sessions on May 8, the foreign relations committee will immediately start an inquiry on the failure of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) to release \$128 million intended for the 32,000 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who were evacuated from Kuwait and Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War. Senate President Protempore Blas Ople said the inquiry will coincide with his takeover of the foreign relations committee from Francisco Tatad who became the Senate majority leader. The delay in a separate DFA inquiry was apparently due to charges that DFA Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo, head of the claims and compensation office, deposited the money to a bank account under his name. Domingo explained he transferred the fund to protect it from the

Y2K bug.” – by Macon Ramos-Araneta, The Manila Times.

The news which surfaced in the past one and a half months have finally confirmed a suspicion “that something was really amiss” which I, and those other claimants I have been in contact with lately, have kept far too long. We confirmed a number of hunches, particularly concerning those who received less than the UN-prescribed \$2,500 minimim. We finally understood why there are a lot of claimants who still didn’t receive notification and why those who already received partial payments have been notified late. Take for example my case: the notice sent by the DFA was received two weeks past the scheduled date I was to go to the DFA. The letter was actually undated and the instruction noted I was to personally appear on June 14, 1999. Two dates appeared, though, in the envelope. Stamped in front was Jun 3 1999 and at the back Jun 7 1999, both originating from Manila. I received the envelope only on June 30! In answer, I sent an email dated July 5 to Domingo and I would like to share the contents, as follows:

"I received five days ago an undated letter informing me of UNCC's approval of the release of the PARTIAL payment of my Category C Gulf War claim. Said letter instructed me to personally appear on 14 June 1999.

"Obviously enough, the scheduled date has already passed. What do I do now? Should I wait for another schedule or should I come anytime? And if I do come, should I be entertained? I presume you have claimants coming over everyday as scheduled.

"Please understand that I would not want to undergo the same experience I had when I went to the DFA last March 26, 1999 (a Friday) to inquire. One lady sitting behind a table just outside the glass door was so busy she practically avoided me. I had only one request then – to check my name on the newly released list. She said that the complete list will be posted on the bulletin board in April and I could come back then. I tried to explain that I'm going to my home place (in Antique) the following day and would be flying off back to Kuwait on April 8 straight from the domestic airport in Iloilo City to NAIA. I had only 15 days leave then.

"I did practically beg her but she completely ignored me. I understand of course that you have rules to follow and that lady must be simply following instructions. But was it very difficult for her to go over the list and check my name knowing my circumstance?

"How I wish your people could be more helpful and considerate to those coming to inquire – especially those who are coming from abroad. Relating to you the above incident has somehow relieved me of my hidden frustration. I hope you could consider relaxing some of your rules.

"I really would appreciate it very much if you could advise me on what I should do now. I'm now arranging for another trip to the Philippines and most likely, I'll be there on or before the 20th of this month. You could either send your helpful advice through email or through Vice Consul Wilfredo Santos. And by the way, he promised he'll get in touch with you to advise you of my predicament."

I did receive a reply three days after and I was told that I could come any day (Monday to Friday) within the next six months!

Come to think of it: had that lady looked into the list, I could have arranged to claim my compensation right there and then. Then I could have been saved from going on another trip to Manila! Sadly, it was not supposed to be the case. The instruction was to check the list in April or to wait for a notification! No

more, no less! Or she will be in trouble with Domingo and his cohorts. Obviously enough, those officials involved were doing all their best to delay notifying the claimants so that the well-deserved and long-overdue pay of the poor OFWs could still stay in their personal accounts to earn interest for themselves!

In the past two weeks, I was on holiday and I spent most of my time reading through the UNCC Resolutions, Decisions and Recommendations, including all press releases (from December 12, 1997 to March 17, 2000) open for scrutiny on its website. I have learned so much and I am now armed with the truth. Somehow, I feel brave to face anybody, especially those Philippine government officials who keep on telling lies! And I feel daring enough to approach anybody, including the UNCC itself. Please read on . . .

“Dear Sir,

“Warm greetings from Kuwait!

“We are a small group of Filipino Gulf War claimants interacting through a mailing list created in response to the recent anomaly involving some high ranking officials of our Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). We still couldn’t believe that the money which should have been given to us claimants in the fastest way possible have been misused by our very own government officials.

“We need help as we don’t know whom to trust anymore. We strongly believe that in the light of what has happened the UNCC should intervene.

“To be honest with you, we are very much confused and hurt. It seems that what we all have gone through were not enough. We all suffered during the long life-threatening ordeal and when we were deemed worthy for compensation by the UN, we didn’t only suffer the long wait of getting our much-earned and long overdue claims, we were also denied of the right and just service we all deserve!

“Please, help us.

“For and on behalf of the Pinoy Gulf War Claimants,

“Freda Editha O. Contreras, Administrator, Pinoy Gulf War Claimants Club  
[http://globelists.theglobe.com/society\\_c...](http://globelists.theglobe.com/society_c...)

“Contributing Editor, Overseas Filipino Workers-Suite101.com  
<http://www.suite101.com/welcome.cfm/over...>”

The above letter was sent last April 14 through the email address provided at the UNCC website. I still am awaiting a response and I hope that it will come soon. Meanwhile, please bear with me, dear readers, as I provide you with more enlightening information. More will come your way in the next couple of days. I am supposed to submit only one story a month but because of the importance of the subject to all concerned OFWs, I am willing enough to spend extra time in providing you all with accurate and up-to-date information. So, keep watch, please!

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## **Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 1**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: June 6, 2000

ARMED with accurate and reliable data accessed from the numerous resolutions, decisions, recommendations and press releases open for scrutiny at the UNCC Website, I am now ready to enlighten everybody on the status of claims for compensation by thousands of Filipino claimants. The task of reading through all the official reports, not to mention the time spent in printing out documents (with some totaling to nearly 150 pages), I would say, was enormous. Still suffering from after-effects of a trauma brought about by my mother's and old nanny's recent near-death experience, I almost gave up writing about the subject. But as promised the last time, and this time inspired by the truth discovered, I would like now to share what I learned from the UNCC itself. Had it only been possible for me to interview the UN Secretary-General, I would have done so, my dear readers. But alas, the Secretary-General or the Head of the UNCC Governing Council for that matter, I believe will not oblige or honor my humble self! As it is, the letter I sent to the UNCC, through email, remains unanswered. And I doubt, really, if it will even be acknowledged at all! Well, never mind, let us all just make good use of what I have gathered so far. Anyway the truth is there and the UNCC is good enough to report its activities in public. I should really not complain, you know . . . . But let me tell you that there are some data missing – the information needed could have been provided before the establishment of the UNCC website. Nevertheless, I felt confident to speculate and draw conclusions to some missing facts based from the latest data provided. You would know what I mean in here as we go along with the discussion.

The United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC)

We already know that the UNCC is that body tasked by the United Nations Security Council (SC) to process claims and pay compensation for losses resulting from Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. In its Resolution 687 dated April 3, 1991, the SC made Iraq legally responsible for the losses:

"Iraq is liable under international law for any direct loss, damage, including environmental damage and the depletion of natural resources, or injury to foreign Governments, nationals and corporations, as a result of Iraq's unlawful invasion and occupation of Kuwait".

It is interesting to note that Iraq accepted the terms and the legal responsibility for damage directly caused to different entities by its invasion and occupation of Kuwait three days after the adoption of Res. 687. As a result, the SC adopted Res. 692 on May 20, 1991, establishing the UNCC and the UN Compensation Fund. On August 15, 1991, Res. 705 was adopted by the SC approving the Secretary-General's recommendation that "the compensation to be paid by Iraq, through the Fund, should not exceed 30% of the value of its exports of petroleum and petroleum products". However, it was only in December 1996, through Res. 986 of April 14, 1995, that the "oil-for-food" scheme was finally launched and the UNCC began to receive 30% of the proceeds of Iraq's oil sales. Before that, the Commission's works were carried forward through its access to amount advanced from the Working Capital Fund of the UN, to reimbursable voluntary contributions from Governments and to the proceeds of Iraqi oil sold after the invasion of Kuwait that had since been frozen by various Governments.

## The Claims

The UNCC received approximately 2.6 million claims since 1991 and the compensation sought exceeds US\$300 billion. There were nearly 100 Governments which submitted claims for their nationals, corporations and/or themselves and some 13 special UN offices also filed claims for "individuals who were not in a position to have their claims filed by Governments". As of its latest press release dated March 17, 2000, the UNCC has already made available a total amount of US\$5,918,127,474.61 to 2,244,513 successful claimants.

Claims were categorized into six: four individual claims (Category A, B, C and D), one for corporations (Category E) and another one for Governments and international organizations, which also includes claims for environmental damages (Category F). As far as the Philippine government and Filipino claimants are concerned, the first four categories (Category A,B,C and D) were the only claims submitted to the UNCC.

Category A claims are those submitted by individuals who had to leave Kuwait or Iraq between August 2, 1990 and March 2, 1991. Category B claims are claims submitted by individuals who suffered serious personal injury or death as a result of Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Category C claims are

individual claims for damages up to US\$100,000 each while Category D claims are those for damages above US\$100,000.

#### Claims filed by Pinoy claimants

You would want to know first, of course, the total number of claims filed by Filipinos before anything else. This information, in fact, was one of the first I looked into and I actually created some tables, making use of Microsoft Excel, summarizing all the information pertaining as well to the total number of claims approved per installment and the corresponding amount recommended for payment by the UNCC including the actual payments made so far. The tables will sure eat up a lot of space and unfortunately I won't be able to include any of them here. But I am too willing enough to share them to you and if you so desire to keep a copy, you only have to send me an email and I'll send the tables to you as attachment.

The Filipino claimants share a mere 46,187 of the estimated 2.6 million claims received by the UNCC. Category A claims total to 39,584; only 68 for Category B; 6,528 for Category C claims; and a mere seven claims under Category D. The total number of Category D claims approved for payment was taken from UNCC Decision reports dated June 24, 1999 (S/AC.26/Dec.68) and December 10, 1999 (S/AC.26/Dec.81). All Decisions of UNCC Governing Council could be accessed on the following URL address: <http://www.unog.ch/uncc/decision.htm> but you need to download a special software in order to open any of the 95 decisions made from the very first, dated August 2, 1991 to the last one, dated March 17, 2000.

Not all claims submitted were approved by the UNCC though. Oh, yes, my dear co-claimants, it's true! Now we know for sure that the news we heard before that quite a number of claims made by Filipinos were disapproved is true. And do you know how many claims were disapproved? Quite a lot, I'm afraid. It's 5,972 in all! And this doesn't include claims denied under Category D, if there was any, that is, as I couldn't find anywhere any reference to it. There were 5,130 claims in Category A alone disapproved; another 819 in Category C and 23 in Category B. Actually the official number recorded under disapproved claims in Category B is 19. Two claims were duplicates then another four were classified under "other" claims and one as suspended. The suspended one, so it appeared, was granted after all as the total Category B claims approved in the end was 45, not 44 as it was initially reported in one of its decisions.

In all, the number of Filipino claims approved for payment by the UNCC is 40,215 with an over-all total recommended amount of US\$167,411,462.16! Broken down into category claims, the following figures, I would claim, are accurate enough, as the numbers were all taken from UNCC's official reports:

Category A claimants total all to 34,454, drawing a staggering amount of US\$135,832,000.00 duly recommended for payment by the UNCC. There were six installments established and every total number of claimants and the corresponding recommended amount for payment was decided during certain meetings identified by dates. First installment, with US\$2,195,000.00 recommended for payment to some 550 successful claimants was decided last October 20, 1994; Second – US\$5,763,000.00 – 1,453 claimants – dated March 22, 1995; Third – US\$5,487,000.00 – 1,542 claimants – May 17, 1995; Fourth – US\$30,465,000.00 – 7,778 claimants – October 11, 1995; Fifth – US\$31,112,000.00 – 7,778 claimants – December 13, 1995; and Sixth – US\$60,810,000.00 – 15,353 claimants – October 15, 1996. Please take note that the last payment made available by UNCC to successful Filipino claimants was last February 17, 2000 in the amount of US\$15,559,311.09. Of the total amount, US\$11,665,500.00 was in payment for Category A claims belonging to the fifth installment bracket. As reported above, fifth installment payment should be US\$31,112,000.00. This means that the UNCC still has to pay US\$19,446,500.00 in order to complete its total recommended amount under fifth installment.

Category B claimants, on the other hand, total only to 45 with US\$155,000.00 as total amount recommended for payment. There were only three installments decided and Filipino claims were reported under second installment – both part 1 and 2. Second installment, part 1 was decided last December 14, 1994 with only one approved claim for the amount of US\$2,500.00. Second installment, part 2 was for 44 approved claims in the amount of US\$152,500.00, decided on March 22, 1995. Funds for all 45 claimants had already been released in full by the UNCC as of October 11, 1995. As mentioned in my previous article, this payment for Category B claimants was reported and published in April 1996 on the front page of the maiden issue of Pinoy Expat News, one of my three failed newspapering ventures in Kuwait. All 45 names of claimants were then identified in the paper. Please take note of the date the UNCC released the fund to the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee (PCCC) and the date the information for payment was disseminated by the Philippine government. Granting the amount was finally received, let's say, a month after the UNCC's reported payment, there's still a difference of five months to the time the government released information on the approval of payments!

Category C claims approved for payment were 5,709 in all with a total amount of US\$30,964,621.51 recommended for payment by the UNCC. There were seven installments for payment decided by the UNCC and the claims made by Filipinos fall under the second, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh one. Second installment in the total amount of US\$1,329,974.64 for 396 approved claims was decided last May 29, 1996; Fourth – US\$727,345.97 – 219 claimants – December 17, 1996; Fifth – US\$7,871,819.05 – 2,093 claimants – June 24, 1997; Sixth – US\$10,691,744.59 – 1,994 claimants – July 1, 1998; and Seventh – US\$10,343,737.26 – 1,007 claimants – June 24, 1999. Included in the last fund release made available to PCCC last February 17, 2000 was an amount of US\$3,749,331.09 under Category C, fifth installment. The fund released was short of US\$4,122,487.96 from its earlier reported recommended payment of US\$7,871,819.05.

Category D claimants were only seven in all with a total recommended amount of US\$459,840.65. There were four installments reported and Filipino claims were decided under the last two. Third installment,

decided on June 24, 1999 was for only one claimant in the amount of US\$20,884.42. Originally, the amount of compensation claimed by the individual was US\$106,342.82 but the recommended amount given by the UNCC, as per Decision No. 68 (1999), was US\$48,957.18. For reasons known only to them, this amount was again reduced to US\$20,884.52, as gathered from UNCC Dec. No. 80 (1999). Fourth installment, part 1, decided on December 9, 1999, reported six claims approved for payment with recommended amount of US\$438,956.23. As of the latest release of fund reported February 17, 2000 by the UNCC, US\$144,480.00 was partially made available under the fourth installment. A total of US\$294,476.23 has still to be funded by the UNCC in order to complete its obligation to the rest of the seven claims approved for payment, granting, that is, that the third installment amount had already been paid. I didn't find any reference made to the release of fund for the recommended amount.

The same holds true to the previous payments under Category A and C, if any, made available by the UNCC prior to its only reported fund release for the Philippines last February 17, 2000 on its website. Luckily, the last news item I wrote about Gulf War claims approved for payment was based from PCCC documents handed over personally to me by Welfare Officer Ofelia Castro-Hudson in January 1998. According to that report which was published on the front page of the Eye Catchers' Pinoy News, dated March 1-15, 1998, there were 1,846 claims approved for payment: 1,450 under Category A and 396 under Category C. There was no mention in the news item about the installment number nor the total amount recommended for payment. It was only during the time I encountered the data, in one of the UNCC's decisions I've printed and studied, that I came to know of the said missing information. I've filled in the numbers to one of my created tables and in there I noted that my last reported news item fell under second installment of both Category A and C. There was a difference though in the number of claims approved under Category A as reported by me in 1998 and as identified in the UNCC Decision No. 28, dated March 22, 1995. The Pinoy News report showed 1,450 while the UNCC decision report showed 1,453. Three claims were missing! (Don't tell me that the PCCC deliberately took off three names from the original list coming from the UNCC and kept the fund somewhere?) Category C claims were both reported as 396. By the way, the total fund made available then to the Philippine government by the UNCC, presumably between the months of July and December 1997, was US\$7,092,974.64 – US\$5,763,000.00 for the 1,453 Category A claims and US\$1,329,974.64 for the 396 Category C claims.

As the information already given here is quite long and because there are still a number of interesting subjects not covered, say, for example the current total amount of fund already released by the UNCC to the Philippines or the actual minimum amount paid to individual claimants, I decided to divide my article into two parts. However, depending on the availability of some data missing, which I have a feeling will eventually be filled up by an incoming UNCC decision report and press release (the latest one, by the way, was March 17, 2000), the article can even be continued to Part 3. And if you noticed, I haven't discussed yet in depth the problems I mentioned in my previous article like the delayed notification of those who already received initial payments and the non-receipt of notice for payment by still quite a number of claimants. And of course, there is that problem encountered by those who already received full payments and yet the amount paid was less than the US\$2,500.00 set by UNCC as initial payment. If nationals from other countries – like India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh – uniformly received a check for US\$2,500.00 as initial payments, why did then some Filipino claimants receive even as low as



US\$500.00 and already considered paid in full by the PCCC? And there is this original problem pertaining to the misuse by government officials of the compensation fund itself. It seems that the government had been quiet about it lately and there was no reference so far made as to decisions came up with by the Philippine Senate, as reportedly a session was to be held last May 8. I have a feeling, my dear readers, that the Filipino Gulf War claimants' money really "talks", and loudly, I guess, that's why everybody's silent?

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## **Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 2**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: July 4, 2000

THE Governing Council of the United Nations Compensation Commission, as gathered from a press release posted on UNCC Website, held its 36th session last June 13-15, 2000 at its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Presided over by Ambassador Hans J. Heinemann of the Netherlands, the Council, basing from three reports and recommendations of concerned Panels of Commissioners, approved payments for compensation in the amount of US\$148,051,137 to 655 Category D (individual claims for damages above US\$100,000) and 10 Category F (claims of governments and international organization) claimants. Including this session's approved payments, UNCC, as of June 15, 2000, has awarded compensation of US\$15,669,471,007 to 2,588,728 claimants.

As of UNCC's latest fund release dated June 8, 2000, a total of US\$6,807,546,431.12 has already been made available to Governments and international organizations for distribution to successful claimants. Those awarded compensation have now reached 1,501,855 in number, nearly half of the total number of claims already resolved. The UNCC still has to resolve claims numbering to 13,086, all under Categories D, E and F. The Commission aims to complete the processing of the remaining claims by mid-2003. There is no target date set by the Commission to complete payments of all compensation sought as fund needed is dependent on Iraq's income derived from export of its petroleum and petroleum products. The UN Compensation Fund receives 30 per cent of the revenue, under the "oil-for-food" mechanism established by Security Council Resolution 986.

New claims and corrections to old

As previously reported, claims filed by the Philippine government for some 40,215 claimants fell under categories A, B, C and D only. With the latest session held by the Council, not only did I note changes in the number of claimants and the total amount of compensation approved for payment, I also learned

that the Philippine government has filed for Category F and E claims. Claims were filed, in particular, by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the Central Bank of the Philippines (CBP) and were all classified under Category F1. The Philippine Airlines (PAL) has also submitted claims under Category E3.

With this new information, my previous report now stands to be corrected: all six claims categories, and not only four, were covered in so far as the Philippine government and the Filipino claimants are concerned. As all claims under Category A, B, and C have long been resolved by the Commission, there are no changes in the total number of claimants as identified in my last report. However, as per UNCC Decision No. 99, dated June 15, 2000, awards of compensation under Category C claims, particularly in the last two installments (sixth and seventh), have been revised. Including corrections to Category A claims (under fourth, fifth and sixth installments), which I noted only lately to have been reported in Decision No. 95, dated March 17, 2000, the total amount awarded for compensation under Category A and C alone is US\$166,643,480.99. Adding up the US\$155,000 already paid to all 45 Category B claimants and the previously reported US\$459,840.65 for seven Category D claims, the total is now US\$167,258,321.64. In my previous report, the total was US\$167,411,462.16.

#### More Category D claimants

I was wrong in my previous assumption that Category D claimants totaled only to seven and that the number of installments decided by the UNCC were only four in all. With the latest session held by the Council, another claim, falling under fifth installment, has been awarded compensation in the amount of US\$39,020.02. The claimant, as reported in Decision 97 dated June 15, 2000, has originally asked for compensation of US\$110,847.00.

It now appears that claims under Category D by Filipino claimants will still increase in number as the Governing Council continues to resolve claims in two to three years from now. Unfortunately, I still can't find any reference as to the over-all total of claims submitted by Filipinos. As of UNCC's latest update of figures under Status of Claims Processing dated June 16, 2000, there are still 8,331 Category D claims to be resolved. In the same table, I noted that 2,397 claims have already been resolved and of this number, 2,201 claimants have already been awarded compensation.

As of June 15, 2000, the total amount recommended for payment to the now reported eight Filipino claimants is US\$498,860.67.

#### Philippine government claims

As contained in the 81-page “Report and Recommendations Made by the Panel of Commissioners Concerning the Fourth Installment of ‘F1’ Claims” dated June 15, 2000, the Philippines was one of the ten Governments identified therein to have sought compensation in the “total approximate amount of US\$425 million, including interest.” Covering nine pages (Paragraphs 164 to 205) of the said report, the Panel has clearly explained the proceedings of how the final total amount of awards for compensation was decided, along with other pertinent and interesting facts and figures.

UNCC Claim No. 5000276 was how the Philippine Category F1 claims was identified in the report. Originally, it said that “the Republic of the Philippines sought US\$32,017,236 as compensation for the costs incurred and losses suffered by two Government departments – the DFA and OWWA – and by the Central Bank of the Philippines.” I found the following statement very interesting and I further quote:

“In a submission dated 8 July 1999, the Claimant attempted to increase the total amount of its Claim to US\$42,124,039. The claims of each entity, as reclassified by the Panel, are addressed in turn.”

In the end, the UNCC has awarded US\$7,567,327 as compensation for the consolidated Philippine Government claim: US\$1,047,998 for evacuation costs incurred by DFA; US\$4,599,072 for OWWA which includes claims for property loss, payment or relief to others and evacuation costs; and US\$1,920,257 for CBP. PAL’s Category E3 claim was contained in Decision 61 dated March 18, 1999. The amount of compensation recommended is US\$52,224. Originally, PAL sought US\$998,872.

I would like to mention that all of OWWA’s approved claims for “payment or relief to others” in the amount of US\$570,926 are supposed to cover the cash loaned to some 5,800 individuals or families evacuated from the Middle East. I learned that those who availed of the financial assistance are being asked by OWWA to pay – thru automatic deduction from the total amount of claims payment received. Now that OWWA’s claim for compensation has been awarded, it should return back to the claimants the full P2,500 taken, as soon as funds are made available by the UNCC. And it should stop from now asking repayments for the loan from those who are still to receive their compensation.

In summary, the over-all total of compensation awards approved by UNCC to the Philippines has now reached US\$174,916,892.66: US\$135,528,000.00 for Category A claims; US\$155,000.00 for Category B; US\$31,115,480.99 for Category C; US\$498,860.67 for Category D; US\$52,224 for Category E; and US\$7,567,327 for Category F.

Issues

To be honest, I feel inadequate to discuss the issues I mentioned the last time affecting the Filipino claimants as a whole. Difficult as it was in the beginning to report on something learned from someone else's report, I somehow managed to sustain my interest and lose not the hope of finding something I can base my story from when I discovered the UNCC homepage on the web. Having full access to the Internet at home, I relentlessly attacked the site and gobbled all the information I could get. Yet some of the data I need couldn't be found in there

.

The most important issue, and by which the writing of these last three related stories was inspired, is the reported misuse of the Compensation Fund by one high-ranking DFA official, obviously, in cohorts with some other undisclosed personas in the government service. After that May 8 Senate hearing, supposedly to question the officials involved, no word was ever heard reporting on the said investigation. The efforts I exerted in the past months to gather the needed information, sadly, were all in vain. In the end, I had to rely on my own resources, both natural and "webby", that is.

Using my analytical mind, largely honed from long years of experience in investigative reporting, I got some answers to most of the questions as I went along with the study of quite a number of UNCC documents printed. When I noticed that the Philippines was not included among those given funds for payment to successful claimants in UNCC's five consecutive releases of funds between April and November 1999, I found it strange that it should be the case. I patiently "looked around" and I found the answer from the following statement released by the Council on the closing of its 31st session last March 18, 1999:

"The Council also discussed the issue of distribution of payments to successful claimants by Governments and international organizations. The Council expressed concern over the significant amount of funds being held by some Governments that have not yet been distributed to claimants within the one year time limit set by the Council and are due to be returned to the Commission. The Council decided to withhold future payments to those Governments failing to distribute monetary awards to the claimants or to return undistributed funds to the Commission."

Without even mentioning names, one can easily surmise that the Philippine government was one among those suspended by the Council.

And now what? Just as the Commission recommenced giving payments to the Philippines last February 17, 2000, the news about the anomalous use of the Fund surfaced. It is no wonder then that in the last two UNCC's release of fund, dated March 17, 2000 and June 8, 2000, the Philippines was again not included!

With regard to the less than the UNCC-prescribed initial payment of US\$2,500 received by quite a number of Filipino claimants, I still believe that the occurrence was not the course of event the Commission would expect. I found a basis to this belief from my readings through each UNCC's report of a latest decision to award or release fund for compensation. Please read the following pronouncement quoted from the Commission's latest press release, dated June 15, 2000:

"The priority accorded to individual claimants in categories A and C in the second phase of payments follows the earlier first phase of payments, which involved an initial payment of US\$2,500 to each successful individual claimant in categories A and C, as well as payment of the full amount to all successful claimants in category B (claims for death or serious personal injury)."

The officials at the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCCS) were claimed by victims of this 'anomalous procedure' to have retorted, when asked, that what was given was what had been originally claimed and approved, accordingly, by UNCC. When I went to the PCCCS office last year to claim my partial payment, I had a chance of sitting beside a claimant whose notice received was for a full payment. I remember asking her then if she already received her initial partial payment and I was surprised to learn that it was her very first notice received. We were both waiting then to be called for submission of documents and "interview" prior to the release of check. She was called first and when she came out she told me that the check she received was just for over US\$1,000! She was told inside that the amount she received was based from what she originally claimed. You should see the look of sadness and unbelief on her face! I felt so helpless as I couldn't give her any help. The only thing I did was to ask one DFA official previously assigned in Kuwait and he told me the same. And I believed him.

We don't know for sure how the DFA official was discovered to have deposited the Fund in his personal account. My guess is that in his effort to protect the interest gained by the big amount of money, he withdrew it at the time the principal was about to be withdrawn and given out to the rightful claimants, with strict orders, for sure, from UNCC. I could be wrong, but who cares?

I'll leave you now dear readers and co-claimants to make your own conclusions. Meanwhile, I continue to wait and hope for a glimpse of good news from the UNCC or from the Philippine government officials themselves. I wonder where Senator Blas Ople is?

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# A call of duty, Part 1

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 2, 2000

TEN years ago today, Kuwait was invaded by Iraq. Kuwait's workforce which formed majority of the estimated 1.6 million residents then was consequently affected. Among the workers who rendered continuous service to the few remaining Kuwaitis and other nationals in Kuwait, after that 'exodus' during the first three months following the invasion, were health professionals. In fact, hospitals were the only major institutions functioning then and were manned by the very few doctors, nurses, technologists and other health personnel who selflessly chose to stay and heeded the call of duty.

Many people must have wondered how these health workers survived the hard work and the harsh situation and I believe very few stories surfaced after the liberation. What I am going to relate here is that story which I have dreamed too long to turn into a book and which I planned to publish today. Alas, time has not been that kind to me that I now end up giving instead some portions of what actually transpired during those difficult and challenging times.

## First 24-hour duty

September 23, 1990 (Sunday). I reported to Nursery for my regular morning duty at 7 am. There were 16 newly-born babies. I was with one of the two remaining Indian nurses. The rest of the Indian nurses and staff didn't report for work as they were all leaving Kuwait the following day. We were busy inasmuch as most of the babies needed special care having been born prematurely. I took off at 1.30 pm and came back at 2 pm for the second shift of duty. I was with two Filipina domestic helpers who were earlier hired by the hospital for help. In the ward, there were two Filipina nurses newly hired as well. I divided my work between the Nursery and the ward since the new nurses were new to the hospital routine. They were ex dental clinic nurses who chose to remain in Kuwait.

When the night shift came, I found myself alone with 22 female patients in the main ward; two elderly male patients one floor below; and 16 newly-born babies in the Nursery. I assigned two Filipina helpers (different from the ones in the morning) in the Nursery while I attended to patients in the ward. I only had one Bangladeshi (the only original "farash" or cleaner left behind) for help in the ward.

There were three newly-operated (CS) patients admitted in rooms far apart from each other; two diabetics and four others awaiting delivery; a bleeding woman in her early stage of pregnancy; and a number of newly delivered mothers all complaining of pain. I was running from one room to another, to

the Nursery and to the Male Ward one floor below. I do not know how I managed the work but I was sane enough when I endorsed the patients the following morning to a co-Filipina; the two male patients to an Egyptian colleague; and the babies to the Indian nurse in the Nursery. I managed to sleep afterwards for five hours then was called back again to attend to a premature baby and straight to night duty.

#### A challenge

September 25, 1990 (Tuesday). I just finished my second night duty – was again alone in the wards. The Indian nurse who was to take over the Nursery did not report as she was finally forced to leave Kuwait. I checked the premature baby (born the other day) inside the incubator and seeing her to be alright, I set to leave for a much-needed sleep uncertain whether I can report back or not to night duty that day. I gave instructions earlier to another three Filipina helpers to ask help from the two nurses in the ward and to call the Pediatrician who was attending to out-patients that day. On my way out, I met the father (a Kuwaiti) of the premature baby, bringing with him a bottle of breast milk. After learning that his baby will be left for hours under the care of three unqualified staff, and after finding out that I might not come back, he got furious and started to shout. He did not give me at all a chance to explain my situation. Feeling tired, sleepy and hungry, all I did was to listen to his angry outburst.

“What will happen to my baby and to all the other patients when all of you are leaving?,” he said.

I felt his anguish and was challenged at the same time. For a while, I forgot about myself and went back to the Nursery. I was later on sent up to the hostel to sleep by the Pediatrician who came to the Nursery for his regular check of the babies.

#### A miracle

September 27, 1990 (Thursday). I was again on night duty, my fourth in a row. It was 2 am and I just finished giving milk (through tube feeding) to the same premature baby and was halfway through my preparation of medicines and IV solutions for the patients in the ward when suddenly there was a power black-out. I immediately ran back to the Nursery to check the baby in the incubator. I found her completely blue and not breathing at all! By then the hospital's emergency power was on. I asked one of the helpers to call a doctor while I resuscitated the baby. By the time the doctor arrived, the baby was already breathing, though a difficult one. After looking at the still bluish baby, I overheard him say: “What do I know about babies?” Stethoscope in hand, he listened to the baby's chest, nodded his head and left in a hurry. A few minutes after he was gone, the baby suddenly stopped breathing again and turned completely blue.

The doctor was called back and I did the same resuscitative measures. Before he left for the second time, he told me not to call him again as there is nothing he could do. He was busy himself assisting mothers delivering babies and he was tired, hungry and sleepy as well. He said that the baby was lucky enough to have survived that long as she was only 32 weeks old and weighed 1.1 kilograms. But I did not give up. I sent one helper out to the main ward and I continued reviving the baby each time she had the apneic attack. I was praying and crying at the same time urging the baby to fight for her life. I was thinking then about the father, who, since her birth, would come early morning and brave the dangers outside just to bring the much-needed breast milk. I was thinking particularly of what he would do when he finds his baby dead. So I fought; and so did the baby! I did not leave her side even when the Pediatrician finally arrived at 6 am (he had been called continuously earlier). When the father arrived at around 7 am, this time with his American wife, the baby was already breathing normally.

As there was still a possibility for the baby to have the same apneic attacks and as I was the only qualified nurse to attend to her, the doctor decided to have the baby transferred to a government hospital. (Two weeks later, I saw the baby alive and strong when I went to transfer another premature baby. I went to her and I remember telling her: "Fight on baby! Your country will soon be free!")

When I came back from the transfer at around 11 am, a Filipina friend of mine (married to a British who was in hiding then) was waiting for me at the Reception area. She was due to deliver her baby. I stayed with her until she delivered her baby girl at around 5 pm and with her baby in the Nursery for another two hours as the baby came out blue and having difficulty of breathing. When the baby was stable enough, only then I went to sleep after more than 24 hours of being awake.

#### A ward re-extended

Early November 1990. One early evening, I was called from sleep to settle a dispute between a staff nurse in the main ward and an employee in the Reception. A patient was admitted in spite of an earlier instruction to the Reception personnel not to admit anymore patients as the ward was already full. As it was, the main ward stationed in Female Section 2 (which is adjacent to the Nursery) was already extended to Female Section 1. And with only two qualified nurses on duty, it was really impossible to attend to all the patients. Helpers (all Filipinas), although numerous then, still lacked qualifications and training.

I found out that the newly-admitted patient to one of the rooms at Female Section 3, came by ambulance from Al-Amiri Hospital, one of the five government hospitals functioning then. She was pregnant and bleeding. I attended to her personally, fixing her IV drip and making her comfortable. She was crying and begging me to save her baby! I reassured her that we will do the best we can and told her



not to worry. In between attending to her, I arranged for the re-opening of the FS3 in preparation for the coming patients. I understood then that all Kuwaitis were coming to our hospital for admission. By then there were additional staff hired and with enough supervision, patient care, although qualityless, went on.

The same patient delivered her baby in the hospital four months after. Kuwait was liberated then but because of a lack of qualified staff, my work was still heavy and exhausting. I was attending then to a particular sick baby and only when he was transferred to Sabah Hospital had I known that his mother was the same woman I attended to a few months earlier whose case started the opening of another ward which led to extended care for more Kuwaitis in need of hospitalization.

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## **A call of duty, Part 2**

A Curse

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: September 5, 2000

January 17, 1991 (Thursday) . Nobody came to report for morning duty and the night sisters were still in the ward when I came to the Nursery at 7 am. I sent all the night sisters home and called all the available staff staying in the Hostel. Bombings, which started early morning of the previous day, still continued and can be heard by us. This prompted the transfer of the patients and babies from the second floor to the basement. Because of the haste of transferring the babies in cribs, the sound created by the wheels and cribs bumping each other started the fear among everybody and soon panic was all over the faces of both patients and the hospital staff.

While the babies in cribs were being transferred to the basement and some of the patients to the lobby, I was left in the Nursery giving instructions to my staff what things and equipment to be transferred as well. When I finally reached the basement, I was met by a tragic sight – mothers who had just delivered were panicking and shouting. I felt a strong compassion and pity for them and when I saw the babies all crammed in two small rooms, I cried. I cursed Saddam Hussein for what he did! I had a hard time controlling my tears; I had to be strong as everybody was looking up to me for support.

Later on the babies were transferred to the lobby, nearer to where their mothers were. I was very very tired then but I had to stay. I couldn't leave the makeshift ward – both the male and female patients were lying in trolleys in the lobby – separated only by a cloth divider. I attended to some of the patient while at the same time managing the temporary nursery.

## Iraqi dinars

Early September 1990. The hospital management started to pay the staff in Iraqi dinars. They multiplied our salary in Kuwaiti dinars to four Iraqi dinars. I was getting then ID750 or more depending on the number of hours I worked overtime. Later on, I stopped counting my overtime as there was no time even for me to recall when and for how long I was called. All the Iraqi dinars I received were given to a few Kuwaiti friends and used to buy food distributed to some Filipinos. I even shouldered the hospital bill of one Filipina who delivered a baby in the hospital. I found no point in keeping the money as I was not sure whether I'll survive the imminent war or not.

By end of March, more than a month after Kuwait was liberated, we were still paid in Iraqi dinars. I refused to take my salary but was later on forced to claim it in early August because I wanted to give the money to a Jordanian baby (whose precious life I also saved during the Invasion) who was leaving Kuwait for good with her family.

Whatever Kuwait dinars I received in August 1990 had never been used as they belonged to the currencies cancelled by the Kuwait government. I still am keeping until now over a hundred dinars and from time to time would give a note or two to friends for remembrance.

## At Jabriya Media Center

Early March 1991. I volunteered as a writer and helped in the setting up of an English paper at the Media Center in Jabriya. The paper, bannered as "Kuwait News" as per my suggestion, unfortunately, never materialized because by then, its mother paper, the Arabic "February 26" was stopped by the government for lack of license. Nevertheless, some of my work was posted on a bulletin board to form a part of an exhibit shown at the center.

Although my work at the center was a brief one, I found it very interesting and rewarding as I had the chance of working with some of the Kuwaiti resistants who stuck it out in Kuwait all throughout the Invasion. I also had the chance of seeing in person some of the "big" people of Kuwait bureaucracy.

## A meeting with UN officials

March 20, 1991. A dialogue was held at the SAS Hotel between officials of the United Nation's Center for Human Rights and the Filipino community in Kuwait. I was the spokesperson for the paramedical group and I got the chance of airing the hard situation we encountered while working during the Invasion. I expected so much from that meeting. I was hoping for a solution to some, if not all, of our immediate problems. The most I got from the dialogue was getting hold of a copy of a fax sent by Mr. John Pace, one of the UN officials we talked to, to the Permanent Mission of the Philippines in the UN Headquarters in Geneva. Whether an action was done as per Mr. Pace's recommendations or not – that I do not know!

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## **Pinoy Gulf War claims, an update**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: October 3, 2000

As promised, I now present a follow-up report on the status of claims for compensation by Filipinos affected by the Gulf War. I managed to gather new information from three sources: a face-to-face interview with a DFA official (when I went for my yearly holiday to the Philippines last July); a UNCC's September 28 press release; and an ABS-CBN news report published online less than a week ago. I will separate though the report from the last two sources and discuss the issues contained therein within the following two weeks.

### **The interview**

Appointed Deputy Secretary-General of PCCCS (Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat) Mr. Sinforiano Mendiola, in an interview held July 21, 2000 at his office at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Manila, disclosed some information which somehow clarified some of the issues mentioned in the past three related articles published here on OFW-Suite101 site.

"Our books are clean and every penny released or spent for operation purposes is recorded and copy furnished to the UNCC," Mendiola said referring to the reported misuse of the Gulf War funds entrusted by the UNCC to his department. A certified public accountant before joining the DFA, he insinuated that his appointment to the present post was partly due to his long years of clean record as DFA's assistant comptroller, regional fiscal representative and consul general (assigned to Mexico and U.K) in the past 37 years of government service. The Fund, he admitted, is indeed deposited at the Philippine National Bank (PNB) under the name of Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo in his capacity as head of the PCCCS. The PCCCS, as a body, he explained, has no identity as far as the bank is concerned.

Interest earnings of the Fund are being used for the whole operation of claims processing, Mendiola said, strongly pointing out that the UNCC is aware of the practice.

“We are, in fact, authorized by the UNCC to derive our operating expenses from the interest earnings of the Fund and this has actually saved every claimant from a 1.5% deduction from his/her claim money,” he explained.

I was aware of this 1.5% deduction from individual claims and am keeping on file this UNCC provision as contained in Decision No. 18, dated March 24, 1994 under the heading “Distribution of Payment and Transparency”, and I hereby quote:

“Governments may offset their costs of processing claims by deducting a small fee from payments made to claimants. The Governments shall be required to provide explanations satisfactory to the Governing Council for any processing costs so deducted. Such fees shall be commensurate with the actual expenditure of Governments. In the case of awards payable to claimants in categories A, B and C, the fees should not exceed 1.5 per cent, and for awards payable to claimants in categories D, E and F, the fees should not exceed 3 per cent.”

#### High interest earnings

The PCCCS acting head related that the decision not to deduct any amount from the claimants’ money came about a few months after the Philippine Government received the first Fund from UNCC in May 1997. Because of the slow process of contacting the approved-for-payment claimants, which almost consumed the then allowable 6 months time-frame established by the UNCC for fund distribution, the interest earned by the Fund in the bank was discovered “surprisingly high”, Mendiola hinted. This prompted the then PCCCS chair Leonides Caday (now Philippine Ambassador to Indonesia) to “suggest” to the UNCC that instead of deducting the cost of operation from the claimants, the PCCCS shall then derive the cost from the interest earnings of the Fund.

“We got the approval from the UNCC and since then, had been regularly submitting reports, as required,” Mendiola reiterated.

He also explained that whenever they need to use the “interest” money, the UNCC’s approval is sought first. He disclosed a recent plan to move the PCCCS headquarters to a bigger area in order to accommodate the 300 to 500 people trooping the DFA building daily to claim, submit papers, inquire or follow-up payments. As soon as everything is settled, the office will relocate to the PNB Financial Center building (just opposite the DFA premises in Roxas Boulevard) and will occupy a whole floor. The now 24

staff members will have to be supplemented with additional workers in order to expedite the processing and release of payments to successful claimants, he announced.

Not suspended

Mendiola denied that the Philippine Government was ever suspended by the UNCC for “non-distribution or delayed distribution” of the Fund to the Filipino claimants. My presumption, as reported in Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 2, he stressed, was wrong!

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## **UNCC completes payments to Pinoy claimants**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: November 7, 2000

BEFORE anything else I would like first to mention a lesson in life which I FINALLY learned recently. It maybe just a case of coincidence but the message was clear enough for me, that is: not to foretell a definite action! Allow me please to explain further . . .

In my May 2, 2000 published article “On Gulf War comp claims” I wrote that I will continue to give pertinent information “in the next couple of days.” Two days after that I was on my way home to the Philippines to attend to my ailing mother whose right leg needed to be amputated. Then in my previous article “Pinoy Gulf War claims, an update” I also mentioned that I’ll present the information I gathered from the two other sources “within the following two weeks.” On the day I was scheduled to write the story – armed actually with fresh news gathered from another DFA official through a telephone interview conducted two days earlier – I had an appointment with my doctor and learned that I need to undergo surgery. Three days after, I was confined in the hospital and went through a major operation!

Actually these last two incidents (the only times, in fact, I foretold something in all my other previous published articles) were not the only ones I had in my life. The previous ones – although I realized each time that I was being taught a lesson – were simply ignored. Maybe because the “reasons” why a planned or foretold action was not done were not too serious ones like having a bout of migraine or diarrhea or suddenly having an unannounced visitor or receiving bad news from home and ending up crying myself out. But wait, I now remember that the only time I had my lower leg in plaster cast for a month (October 1992) was after I promised a friend of mine to join her in ice skating lesson. Funny, I actually broke my ankle while bowling and it happened just a day before the scheduled skating activity!

Well, enough for lessons in life! I just hope that I really learned this last one. I hope too that whoever reads this article will learn a lesson from my experience.

And having said that – just now I thought of telling that this piece on UN compensation claims will be the last one I'll write for Suite101! Here I go again . . .

#### The other sources

Not only two, as previously mentioned, but three more sources of information will be presented hereon in connection with the 40,200+ claims for compensation by Filipinos from the UN as a result of Iraq's invasion and seven-month occupation of Kuwait. The first two sources from where I gathered new information are UNCC's latest press releases and a news item published online by ABS-CBN's Pinoy Central, specifically under its OFW-related news. The third source is from another DFA official through a long distance telephone interview I conducted last October 13.

I would like to mention first the ABS-CBN news which was published online last week of September. Headlined 'Senate panel seeks faster settlement of Gulf War damage claims' the report focused on the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee's recent discovery that "about 24,000 overseas Filipino workers (OFW) have not received any compensation for losses and damages they suffered after they were displaced from their job in Kuwait" prompting Sen. Aquilino Pimentel, as chair of the body, to urge the PCCCS "to speed up the processing and approval of claims."

Pimentel was quoted as saying that "the affected OFWs, represented by Migrante International, have a valid reason to complain about the gross delay in the processing of damage claims by the PCCCS." It also reported that the Blue Ribbon panel found out that "of the 45,000 claims filed by displaced Filipino workers, only 21,172 claims with a total value of \$55 million have been settled and paid by PCCCS."

#### Another interview

In order to verify the report, I tried to contact Mr. Sinforiano Mendiola but he was out in a meeting when I telephoned the PCCCS office last October 13. I talked instead to Mr. Dalidig "Jack" Tanandato, assistant to Mr. Mendiola. Interviewing Jack gave me a feeling of the old days. It was like going back to the time when I was still actively writing for Kuwait Times way back in 1994/95 when he used to be the source of majority of the news item I wrote about the Philippine Embassy's activities in Kuwait. Jack used to be

assigned, among many others, to the Gulf War Compensation section of the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait.

He confirmed that indeed the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee conducted an investigation on the reported misuse of the Compensation Fund. Twice, in fact, the officials of PCCCS, headed by DFA Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo, were called to the Senate hearing.

The ABS-CBN reference to the 21,172 claims so far settled and paid by PCCCS, Jack said, was not the latest figure as it was contained in a report dated April 2000. As of September 30, 2000, the total number of claimants given compensation has already reached 27,898 with a total value of US\$67 million, Jack reported. The figure covers only those claimants under Categories A and C.

“Just recently, on October 10 to be exact, we sent out nearly one thousand notices to claimants whose compensation money has been received by the PCCCS from the UNCC,” Jack said. This now covers the second phase and includes full payment of claims under Categories A and C. Those notified were claimants initially given partial payments in 1997.

“The process will now be faster than before because the claimants have all been officially identified, with updated addresses and status,” Jack emphasized.

Before the end of our conversation, Jack reaffirmed Mr. Mendiola’s claim that there was (and is) no anomaly involved whatsoever in the Fund distribution or payment to the claimants by the PCCCS. He added that “whatever received from the UNCC for distribution to claimants as contained on a provided list is paid within the time-frame, with a few exceptions of those whose whereabouts are difficult to determine.” Any unclaimed money, he said, is being returned to the UNCC, as per rules and regulations followed. He likewise announced that the PCCCS headquarters will be relocated on November 2 to the PNB Financial Center, occupying the whole first floor of the building.

#### The UNCC report

According to a UNCC press release dated September 6, 2000, the second phase of payments has now concluded with its concurrent release of US\$825,177,061.61 to some 30,951 successful claimants. Second phase payments, which prioritized individual claimants in Categories A and C while also providing meaningful compensation to claimants in Categories D, E and F, totaled all to US\$4,860,461,112.60 made available to respective Governments for distribution to 870,816 individual claimants.

It may be recalled that the first phase of payments involved an initial payment of US\$2,500 to each successful individual claimants in Categories A and C, as well as payment of the full amount to all successful claimants in Category B. UNCC reported that US\$3,252,337,997.09 were made available to 1,498,119 successful claimants under the first phase of payments.

In its latest press release, dated October 26, 2000, as read on its website, UNCC has “today commenced the third phase of payments by making available a total of US\$1,275,020,540.47 to 38 Governments and one international organization for distribution to 1,538 successful claimants.” To date the overall amount of compensation made available by UNCC totals to US\$9,414,912,436.73!

### Analysis

Based from the data I gathered from the UNCC website, I am now compelled to give my analysis of the issue. I could be wrong but the figures given by the UNCC supercede whatever data provided by the DFA officials and other sources. What

could be more official and reliable than the UNCC itself?

It may help to better understand whatever conclusion I’ll present shortly if I summarize the claims made by Filipinos and consequently approved for payment by the UNCC. The figures will speak for themselves, I would say.

All six categories (A,B,C,D,E,F) were filed by Filipino nationals and the Philippine government. Category A claims approved for payment total to 34,454 with UNCC recommended amount of US\$135,528,000.00; Category B – 45 claims – US\$155,000.00; Category C – 5,709 claims – US\$31,115,480.67; Category D – 8 approved claims so far (12 in all according to Jack Tanandato) – US\$498,860.67; Category E – 2 claims – US\$55,104.00; and Category F – 3 claims – US\$7,567,327.00. The over-all total of approved claims came up to 40,221 with recommended amount of US\$174,919,772.66.

As mentioned earlier, the UNCC, as of September 6, 2000, has already completed the second phase of payments which involved full payments to all Categories A, C and D individual claims as well as E (claims by corporations) and F (claims by Governments). It has been reported that US\$25,000 has initially been made available to claims reaching the US\$100,000 limit under Category C then followed by releases of US\$75,000.00 thereafter. This means that if a Category C claim is US\$25,000.00 or less, the full remaining amount (minus the initial payment of US\$2,500.00 made into effect during the first phase of payment) should be received by each individual claimant as approved. Please note that the UNCC is now on its third phase of payments, which commenced October 26, 2000, and involves initial payment of US\$5 million, in the order in which the claims have been approved, to claimants in Categories D, E and F.



Within this phase, payments of US\$10 million will also be made, depending on the availability of funds, which as reported before, are derived from the “Oil for Food” mechanism of the United Nations.

I find it strange though that in the last 10 reported releases of Fund by the UNCC (from April 22, 1999 to October 26, 2000) only once – on February 17, 2000 – was the Philippines included among those Governments paid. And while the first reported release of Fund on April 22, 1999 involved payments under the sixth installments of both Categories A and C, the February 17, 2000 release of Fund to the Philippines and 49 other countries reported payments made available under the fifth installments of Categories A and C!

Try as I may to find a valid explanation to this occurrence, the same hunch as I had before – that the Philippines might have been suspended by the UNCC for its failure to distribute on time the Funds initially released in 1997 – continues to surface. Proofs which I can give are the following:

a) one out of 10 successive releases of Funds (within the past 18 months) by the UNCC was all the Philippine government has had;

b) while the UNCC completed the second phase of payments last September 6, 2000, which, by the way, commenced last September 23, 1999, only this October 10 the PCCCS sent out notices to nearly 1,000 claimants due for full payment under the second phase of payments;

c) the reported 27,898 Filipino claimants already given initial payments of US\$2,500 (which also includes those who already received full payments with some receiving less than US\$1,000.00) are way below the actual figures provided by the UNCC on its website, taking into consideration that the first phase of payments had already been concluded. Remember that approved claims for Category A alone totals to 34,454! If all had been paid initially as dictated by UNCC under the first phase of payments, then why only 27,898 had been reported paid as of September 30, 2000? And what about the 5,709 Category C approved claims?;

d) the DFA reported US\$67 million paid out to successful claimants as of September 30, 2000 is too low a figure basing from the over-all US\$174.9 million recommended amount for payment by UNCC. Categories A and C approved claims alone make up US\$166.6 million of the over-all total; and –

e) as there was no UNCC-reported release of fund prior to and after the February 17, 2000 payment made to the Philippines, you may agree with me in claiming that what is now being – or maybe still to be – distributed by PCCCS (it’s nearly a month now since the October 10 sending of notices) comes from the

US\$15,559,311.09 reported release of fund by UNCC last February 17, which, by the way, has been identified in the UNCC press release as falling under the second phase of payment.

If I were to believe UNCC's claim that payments under Categories A, B and C had all been paid as of September 6, 2000 I will surely wonder where the bulk of the Filipino claimants' compensation money is. It's not with the PCCCS – that's clear enough according to the 9 out of 10 UNCC-reported releases of fund since 18 months ago. The UNCC, of course, can't be quiet about its release of fund to the Philippine government, can it? Oh my, what am I heading to this time?

Will someone please give me the correct analysis of this very confusing issue?

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## Woes of an OFW

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: December 5, 2000

WHAT you are going to read this time is extraordinary. It is not what I planned to write about but because of my present predicament, which you will learn shortly, I feel unable to function normally as I should. I ask you, please, to read the following letter which I sent to the members of OFW Club mailing list I administrate. It is my wish to make you understand the woes of an OFW.

By the time this article comes out, I will still be in the hospital.

My dear friends and members of this Cyberkadahan,

Year 2000 – the Year of OFWs – so it seems, is not a good one for me. What I have been through so far could have made anyone lose hope and faith in God. Yet, here I am – physically and emotionally scarred and spiritually near-drained – still trying to understand why I have gone through (and still am continuing to) a lot of trials.

We have heard it often enough that a person can only take as much and that God, in all His unfathomable wisdom, won't give us something we can't handle. How true is this to each one of you?

And how far, do you think you can go in facing the hurdles of life? Especially if they are given to you one after another?

Please bear with me, my dear friends, as this message will be a long one. I know that there are lessons to be learned from my story and I would love to share it with you all. I hope that there's no one among you who's facing more than I do now. I really don't know because most of you had been very quiet recently. Some of you may also be going through a lot this year and I would like to believe that I'm not alone!

When I learned early March this year (just 3 weeks after suffering for the first time from acute urinary tract infection – ah the pain and the discomfort!) that the fibroid tumor (discovered still small last year) had started to grow uncontrollably inside my womb (uterus), and that both my fallopian tubes are blocked (crushing all my hopes of conceiving the natural way), I was devastated! Initially, the doctor advised removal of the tumor by surgery. Ever hopeful (Waleed and I) that I can still conceive through IVF (test tube), we asked for non-surgical option. In April, I commenced taking Inj. Zoladex and continued until mid-September. All along I suffered the side effects, which, believe me, had put a lot of strain in my inter-personal relationships with colleagues at work, and with Waleed, insofar as my marriage was concerned. Any ordinary man or husband could have, literally, thrown me out of his life! Through Waleed's love and friends' support, I passed through the six months period of treatment.

In early April, my mother was rushed to the hospital because of an infected wound in her right foot. Two weeks after my Mom was discharged from the hospital with a clean bill, I received news that my children's Nanny's father died. Soon after that my Mom's foot was discovered gangrenous and she had to be rushed to the hospital again. By May 4, I was beside my Mom as she fought for the infection on her leg and lungs. May 6 when I experienced a chest-suffocating pain (similar to the one I felt when my father died in 1981) after seeing my Mom in the Recovery Room minutes after her right leg (from 2 inches below the knee) was amputated. May 8, my old Nanny (who used to be my Mom's personal maid when she was younger) collapsed and had a convulsion because of high fever. She was also rushed to the hospital where my Mom was and subsequently treated for pneumonia and later for TB of the bones.

When I returned to Kuwait on May 19, I started to feel the side effects of the sleepless nights and unrelieved tension I went through while looking after my Mom and Nanny in the hospital. I experienced for the first time the worst headache you can ever imagine of! And also first time in my life that I spent my birthday (May 26) writhing in pain in bed!

The ensuing three months came out uneventful – except for a drained savings – as I needed to see my mother again (July/August). First week of September, my eldest son, who I excitedly and happily enrolled last May in college, dropped all his subjects and refused to go back to school! Then exactly a month after that, my nephew, whose college education I was financing, also dropped out just before the final exams!

Gone with the wind the nearly P70,000 I spent for the two – tuition fees, dorm fees, food and personal allowances + books and personal things!

Then exactly a month after I took the last of the injections, it was discovered that the tumor didn't shrink and it even grew bigger! Surgery was the only option left and on October 19, I was 'knifed' by a surgeon. I need not tell you the pain and discomfort I suffered after the anesthesia wore off! And while recovering, I still have to endure more pain because of gas accumulation in my stomach and intestines. And I still suffer from the gas pain up to this very moment!

Do you think all is well after the tumor has been removed? NO, and it's for this that I'm now posting this long message to you all.

Yesterday (November 16, 2000), I was notified to see my doctor. When I went late in the afternoon with Waleed, we were told that the biopsy report turned out positive for malignancy! Oh yes, my dear friends, I have CANCER of the uterus! Although suspecting it all along, I was still in shock – not because I may be dying soon (I fully accept the fact that we will all die sooner or later and that it is not in our hands to decide when it will happen) –it's more on the realization that I won't ever, ever produce an offspring for my beloved husband! I will have to be knifed again, as you must have guessed by now, and this time the whole lot – uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes and cervix – will be removed! And it will have to be done ASAP – within this week, most probably, just a month after I was last cut surgically.

My main worries, aside from not being able to produce anymore a child for Waleed, are my children and family members: mainly my mother, my youngest sister and my old Nanny who are all medically unfit; my other younger sister whose husband is under my employ (my own special way of dole-out actually), my older sister with her two boys who I am temporarily supporting, and my only brother who is also dependent on my support. I also worry about the three family breadwinners under my employ: two as caretakers of my Mom, sister and old Nanny and another one as helper in the house. I also am worried about Arlo – my adopted son (a member of a cultural minority group) who is doing well in his studies (Vocational course). I promised him the last time that he'll join me here in Kuwait as soon as he gets his diploma. What will happen to them all should my body finally waste off?

I can't afford to die now! Please, oh Lord, not yet! My family needs me and I wouldn't want to forsake them!

Sorry, I am being overly dramatic, I know, and I may sound corny to some of you. But, please, just indulge me this very moment. After all, we may never get to "see" each other in the future!

If you don't hear from me in 2 to 3 days' time – that means that I'm in the hospital again. All I ask of you is to pray for me: that the cancer cells have not invaded other parts of my body. I don't want to run after every part of my body just to prolong my life. Let it be localized only in my reproductive organs and if it turns out otherwise, let me die the soonest!

Again, so sorry I am, my dear cyberfriends for giving you my worries.

In tears,

Freda

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## **Surviving cancer in a foreign land**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: July 20, 2001

IN the past 12 years of my stint abroad as an overseas Filipino worker, never did I think that I will ever face a "death" sentence. Yes a death sentence – not as a consequence of a crime committed but because of having the most dreaded and deadly human disease as cancer! Thousands and thousands of miles away from my immediate family and country, having had to face this life's ultimate ordeal is something, in itself, very debilitating! I thought that I will have to deal only with earning dollars so I can provide the best for my family back home in the Philippines! I was wrong!

I admit that I was really caught off-guard with the shocking diagnosis I received that fateful day of November 16, 2000! Who wouldn't, anyway! Foremost on my mind was not the fear of dying – it came to fore much later as I went through the process of accepting my fate. Ah, the fear I had then!

Who will take care of my ailing mother, old nanny and youngest sister? Who will look after my two children and adopted son? Who will provide the needs of my other siblings? Who will help those breadwinners under my employ? Who will look after the interest of our land which I painstakingly redeemed numerous times from various individuals? I fear the land will go because, sad to say, my siblings' hard-up situation will force them to sell the land. Then my wildest dream of having the happiest and the most beautiful family compound will all go to naught!

Those were the questions I asked then. Of course, they were asked because I thought I will die soon! Funny, really, how the word ‘cancer’ can make us think immediately of death!

Actually, these very real responsibilities I have, were the ones which helped me fight back and stay convicted to live a long, long life! I tell you, there was once a time when I was in the last thread of hope that I asked God to end my life! Be quick with it, oh Lord, I prayed. Looking back, I strongly believe, that it was the time when I realized that God didn’t want to end my life. I strongly believe that He just wanted to shake me and tell me that: “Hey, you’ve been too much engrossed in helping others that you forgot to help yourself! Wake up and attend to your ailing body and reestablish your priorities in life!”

From then on, I faced my “death” sentence with renewed vigor! I promised myself that I will never, never allow my body to be wasted away by this dragon! As you know, some parts of my body were already removed and lately, as a consequence of another not-so-common human disease named Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI) I inherited from my late father, two new bony areas are slowly wasting away. This, of course, along with my fast deteriorating hearing loss, is not connected to the cancer. I understand that some more parts will possibly be involved in the years to come but I don’t care! I will fight this monster until the last breath of my life! Even if I have to crawl in order to go to work! I want to be strong and I want to keep my body working for as long as it takes to function!

Since the publication of my article “Woes of an OFW” last December 5, 2000, so many people, known and unknown to me, have sent emails to ask about me. The steady flow of emails I received, especially the ones from the three mailing lists (two were created by me prior to my cancer diagnosis) I subscribe to, actually kept me going and amidst the trials I continuously faced, I slowly emerged from my temporary downfall into a stronger, positive and fighting demeanor!

The initial shock of the diagnosis started to wear off when I began to learn about my disease. The internet suddenly became my ally! I spent the next 10 hours or so, after hearing the bad news from my gynecologist, searching the web.

Leiomyosarcoma – such strange-sounding word! How do you get one, I asked then? Because I remember the doctor told me before that the fibroid is never malignant! Then how come I had a cancerous fibroid tumor? Leiomyosarcoma, or LMS for short, is a very rare form of cancer affecting the soft (smooth muscle) tissues of the body. And according to one of my readings, LMS is known for its high metastatic activity! Oh, my, what now? The tumor was already removed after invading my uterus. Where else can it go, I asked then.

More search and I was finally taken to this mailing list which later has become my lifeline as I struggled to accept my life-threatening ordeal. The mailing list – The Leiomyosarcoma (cancer) Online Support Group – has provided me with accurate information and the latest innovative management for my type of LMS! I really am thankful to God I found the list because it has saved me from having to accept from the not-so-knowledgeable-on-LMS oncologists in Kuwait their standard practice of subjecting a “high grade” cancer patient to chemotherapy and radiation. The caring members of the list warned me that LMS does not, if at all, respond to chemotherapy and radiation.

#### Another major surgery

Just over a month after undergoing my first ever major surgery – myomectomy, to remove the fibroid tumor from my uterus – I was again wheeled to the operating room last November 29, 2000. The operation, according to my husband, lasted for nearly five hours. The surgeons, after removing my uterus, two ovaries, two fallopian tubes and cervix, took their time in looking into my other organs for possible infiltration of the cancerous tumor. My appendix went, along with a very “suspicious” nodule above my small bowel.

What else did they remove? I remember asking my husband as soon as I regained consciousness. I was informed beforehand, and was made to sign a paper testifying to the knowledge, that the surgeons may remove other organs aside from our previously agreed ones (the whole reproductive organs) if needed. Did they remove my stomach, or part of it? What about my intestines? My liver? My spleen? My gallbladder? My kidneys? My urinary bladder and ureters? Oh my, you should see the expression on my husband’s face!

As related by my husband, he had difficulty controlling his tears, when he saw me after the surgery. It was too much for him to take and he wished no other husbands will ever be subjected to the same situation he faced! I was white as a paper, he said, and all kinds of tubes, bottles and bags were connected to my body. He could hardly see my face because of the oxygen mask covering almost all area of my tiny face. I have one large tube connected to my nose; another tube to the right side of my neck (central venous line) where three bottles of solution were simultaneously connected; a tube connected to my left arm where blood was dripping from a bag; a tube on both sides of my lower abdomen where drains from my abdominal cavity were pouring into weird-looking bags; and another tube for draining of urine. A funny-looking object was also connected to my right index finger (was reminded of ET, the movie) which gave off a sound every time my vital signs showed below or above normal. My chest was full of numerous small round patches connected, by tiny wires, to another machine which monitored my heart. And one tiny wire connected to my back – the only tube, in fact, which I welcomed gladly – which supplied my body with pain-relieving medication. In one hour, I was allowed to press the button four times, and the machine will pump the heavenly drug into my system.

I stayed in the Recovery Room (Intensive Care Unit) five days and four nights. By the time I was moved to my room in the Female Ward (of the Kuwait Cancer Control Center), I only had three tubes – the central venous line and the two ones connected to both sides of my lower abdomen for draining out the secretions from inside my cavity.

My saga continues, my dear readers, on the second part of this long-overdue story.

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## **My saga continues . . .**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: July 27, 2001

ONE way or the other, each one of us takes his/her own share of the world's ills. Depending on our strength – gained or inherent – we either succeed or fail. But sure – we all fight in order to survive! Those who failed, I believe, didn't gain enough "experience" to deal with the stress, or might have just started to have the experience and the problem being faced is already serious or life-threatening!

I consider myself blessed to have undergone a lot of trials in life and I've learned early on that I become a stronger person each time I overcome one. As in rainy days, my life's "pours" come incessantly. Yet each pour has given me the experience to battle bravely the coming ones!

"I won't be surprised if a bomb falls over my head right this very moment!," I remember telling my husband after reading a report of my first post-operative CT scans. Complications, yes, but I tell you – not the first! Let me continue with my saga . . .

### **Diabetes**

On the sixth day of my confinement at the Kuwait Cancer Control Center (KCCC), I was informed by the head of the Oncology Team assigned to my case, that my blood sugar was continuously elevated. This could be because of the intravenous fluids I've received, and was still receiving (his eyes focused on the 5% Dextrose currently running) or as a result of my body's reaction to the stress. Oh, no, I said, unbelieving and dismayed, yet very aware of the possibility!



So, I have diabetes as well! I know that I got it from my mother, who, if you remember, had her right leg amputated last year because of a gangrenous foot.

It seemed that the list of my own share of the world's ills was adding up by the leaps. Brittle bone disease (or Osteogenesis Imperfecta), deteriorating hearing loss, diminishing eyesight, cancer and now diabetes! Hmm . . . what next?

The rest of my 11-day hospital confinement passed by uneventful. The pains I endured from daily needle pricks; gradual removal of the various tubes connected to my body (with naso-gastric tube the worst of all!) and from the still fresh 18-cm long surgical wound on my tummy were all temporarily forgotten when I was finally discharged. Actually I asked to be discharged – ahead of the time-frame established by the onco team – because I was terribly missing my own bed!

You guessed it right. First thing I did upon reaching home was to connect to the internet. I was very excited about the emails which have accumulated in my mailbox. Although my husband had been supplying me daily (all throughout the 11 days I stayed in the hospital) with emails from known relatives and friends, a lot were still there waiting to be read, mostly from members of the three mailing lists I subscribe to. Of course, all the junk mails had already been deleted by my thoughtful hubby. He's really an angel, you know!

When it was time for the stitches to be removed, I went back to KCCC, happy with the knowledge that I will soon be freed from the irritating dressing and tapes over my surgical wound. The first 14 stitches, starting from up (1 and ½ inches above my navel), went without problem. Grip, cut, pull, grip, cut, pull – so went the forceps and scissors continuously. I felt very less pain. Ah . . . but I was wise enough to take pain killers before leaving the house!

When the surgeon reached the last four remaining stitches, he felt something extra soft, pressed down the skin a little too hard and 'snap' went the third and fourth to the last stitches! Serous fluid then oozed out, a lot, believe me!

Voila! Good "new" diabetes was doing its job very well! With two pieces of gauze stuffed inside the opening, I was finally sent home with instruction to come for a daily dressing.

E. coli infection

The following day, I was informed that the culture and sensitivity report (from a body discharge taken prior to the surgery) finally arrived and showed positive for E. coli infection. Not again!

Ah well, I said, antibiotics can easily solve the problem – as it did to an E. coli infection of urinary tract I had over a year ago! The doctor prescribed antibiotics alright but alas not the tablet or capsule kind but the intravenous (IV) one, to be taken every 12 hours! Needle pricks again! Will I ever finish?

It really helped being a nurse. You know what I did? I asked for an IV line to be established – as I know I won't be able to take the twice a day pricks into my veins. I already developed this "needle phobia" and besides, most of my veins were already collapsed. Now, picture me with this needle-guided thin plastic tube imbedded into a vein in my arm. The tiny tube was connected to a long bigger tube curled around and taped to the base of my left lower arm with a small plastic stoppage at the end. Each time I was due for the antibiotic push, I would remove the tapes, uncurl the tube, open the plastic covering the stoppage, and push the antibiotic solution via a disposable syringe, grimace a bit because of the pain felt as the cold solution passes through my vein and then do the action in reverse.

Oh, yes, I was doing it to my self at home – most of the time alone or with my husband's assistance! Why not, I protested, when my husband initially refused for me to do the IV push in the house! It's not the first time and it won't be the last! I was referring then to the first one (in a series of many episodes) I did while serving a private hospital during the infamous invasion and occupation of Kuwait by Iraq. (Please see related stories A call of duty, Part 1 and A call of duty, Part 2). Because of the scarcity of staff and the lack of time to properly imbibe food, I resorted then to giving myself an IV shot of Vit. C with calcium – alone in the ward! The fastest way I know to regain the strength continuously lost by lack of sleep and food – just like I was a drug addict!

### Self-pity

During one of those recent IV pushing actions, I experienced this profound feeling of self-pity. It was actually triggered by my difficulty in removing one of the sticky tapes holding the curled tube in place. I was already using both my right hand and mouth but each time I made a move I was feeling the thin tube imbedded under my skin moving out of place. Exasperated, I almost pulled the whole thing out, especially after my right elbow accidentally pushed the syringe – full of antibiotic solution I prepared earlier – down to the carpet! Luckily enough, I managed to stop myself. I cried instead and all those unshed tears in the past days suddenly gushed out uncontrollably! Oh God, please help me, I shouted! Help me overcome this insignificant difficulty and please take me out from this pit of self-destruction and self-pity!

After I recovered from that soul-searching episode, I got up revived, to prepare another antibiotic solution ready for another try. When it was time to remove the sticky tape, I didn't encounter any difficulty. The tape just went easily! Unknowingly, the tears, which flowed down earlier to my left arm resting on my lap, sipped underneath the tape.

Oh, what a wonder! I then smiled and felt this unexplainable peace in my heart!

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## **Worse than Iraqi invaders**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 2, 2001

DR. Fawzi Elhami Ali, one of OFW-Suite101 frequent visitors, observed it right when he noted in a previous Discussion:

"It's a sad situation . . . that the Filipino officials entrusted with solving the OFWs' problems are in fact prolonging their suffering and profiting from it. In this way, I find these officials no less cruel to the Filipino claimants than the Iraqi invaders of Kuwait!"

It is indeed a sad situation, and abominable, especially hearing such a comment from a non-Filipino!

The officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) manning the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCCS), since the mess involving fund distribution to claimants was exposed early last year, have continuously denied and vigorously covered their anomalous activities. But the facts and figures presented – in public at that – by the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) prove, without reasonable doubt, that the officials have indeed misused the compensation fund which should have been long distributed to the rightful claimants. One has only to read the numerous decisions, reports and recommendations, and press releases on the UNCC website in order to draw an intelligent conclusion. The tales of difficulties faced by and disheartening experiences of concerned Filipinos in the whole process of claiming their grossly-delayed compensation from PCCCS are also living witnesses to the anomalies committed by these Philippine government officials!

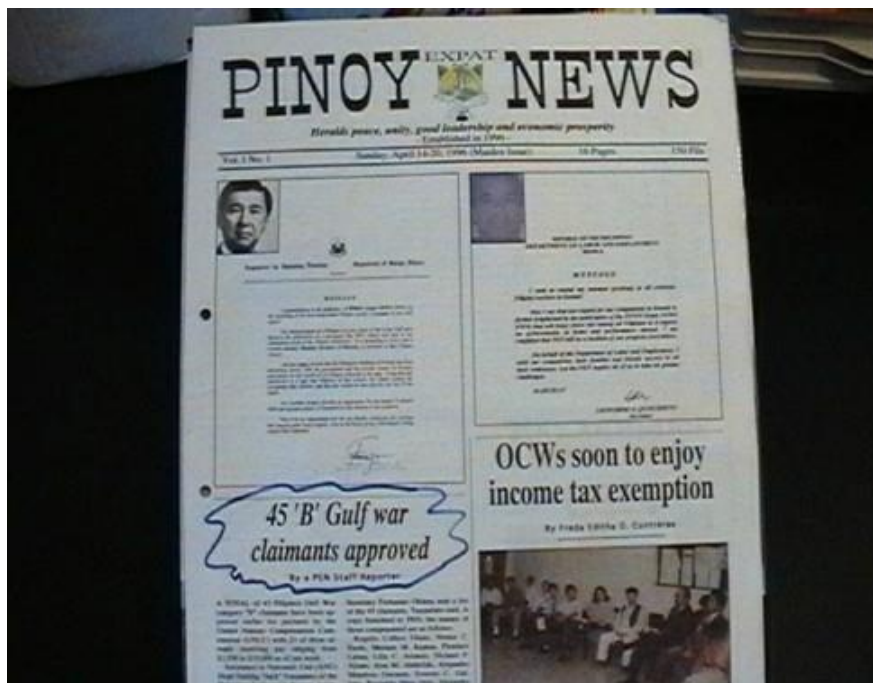
A long 11 years

IT IS eleven years today since Iraq invaded her neighboring Kuwait. For seven agonizing months, Iraqis occupied and ransacked Kuwait and terrorized her people. Imagine how those individuals battled the dangers – unfathomable ones – to their lives.

Soon after the liberation of Kuwait, the United Nations Security Council declared it just for Iraq to pay for its misdeeds (please read Resolution 687, 692, and 986). Thus the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) was created. The UNCC, after setting up rules and regulations, almost immediately sent out forms, through representative governments, for distribution to people and institutions affected. Members of the UNCC Governing Council, early then, deemed it URGENT that the people who suffered during the invasion be compensated for their losses! (Please read Claims Processing).

After January 1, 1995, through Decision 23: [S/AC.26/Dec.23 (1994); 21 October 1994], the UNCC stopped accepting further individual claims. Shortly thereafter, it began sending out payments to duly approved claimants, prioritizing Category 'B' claims (serious personal injury or death) through their governments. In October 1995, the UNCC approved to release to the Philippine government US\$155,000.00 for distribution to 45 approved 'B' claimants. (Please refer to Decision 32: [S/AC.26/Dec.32 (1995); 12 October 1995], Decision 26: [S/AC.26/Dec.26 (1994); 15 December 1994], and Decision 27: [S/AC.26/Dec.27 (1995); 22 March 1995]).

The Philippine government sent out word about the release of fund only in the early months of 1996. The 45 names of those successful claimants were published front page of the maiden issue of Pinoy Expat News or PEN, an independent paper circulating in Kuwait in early to mid 1996. Filipino 'B' claimants, accordingly, began receiving their compensations shortly thereafter. Between 1996 to 1997, the PCCC was quiet while the UNCC continued to release funds to other governments whenever it received then from the 30% revenues from Iraq's petroleum and other petroleum products sales. At the moment, UNCC is receiving 25% share under the "oil-for-food" provision of the UN Security Council.



In early 1998, news came out from the DFA announcing new fund releases from UNCC for some 1,846 claimants under Category A and C. I was entrusted then, luckily enough, by Philippine Embassy officials in Kuwait, to disseminate the information. It was also published front page of the Pinoy News, another publication and the last of my failed newspapering ventures in Kuwait. Sadly, that was the last public announcement made by the DFA. It also ceased to make public the list of successful claimants.



Approval of those 1,846 claims by UNCC was contained in two separate decisions: Decision 28: [S/AC.26/Dec.28 (1995); 22 March 1995] subtitled 'Decision Concerning the Second Instalment of Claims for Departure from Iraq or Kuwait (Category "A" Claims)' and Decision 36: [S/AC.26/Dec.36 (1996); 30

May 1996], ‘Decision Concerning the Second Instalment of Individual Claims for Damages up to US\$ 100,000 (Category “C” Claims).’ Nearing the end of each of the UNCC’s decisions on claims approval, one may read the following:

“Reaffirms that when funds become available, payments shall be made in accordance with Decision . . .” (Decision numbers change according to the claims type and installment bracket).

The missing link, presumably released between late 1996 till mid-1997, is the first-ever payments made to Category A claimants, totaling all to 550. The particular UNCC decision noted that US\$2,192,500.00 in funds were approved for payment. The amount was later corrected to US\$2,195,000.00.

#### Suspension of delinquent governments

The Governing Council of the UNCC ruled in Decision 18: [S/AC.26/Dec.18 (1994); 24 March 1994] entitled ‘Distribution of Payments and Transparency’ that each government, upon receipt of funds from the UNCC, shall distribute same to the claimants within six months. Thereafter, the government has another three months to report on its payment activities. Should it fail to do as specified, the Council “may decide not to distribute further funds to that particular Government.”

This pronouncement by the Council has lately been emphasized by its inclusion, beginning on its October 26, 2000 press release. Previous nine press releases on payments made by UNCC – the first of which was dated April 22, 1999 – didn’t include this particular provision. For easy reference, I would like to quote the statement (page 2, last paragraph) in full:

“The Governing Council monitors the distribution of payments to claimants by the relevant Governments and international organizations.

Governments and international organizations are obliged to distribute funds to the successful claimants expeditiously and to report to the Commission on payments made to claimants. Any funds undistributed to claimants by Governments and international organizations within twelve months of receiving payment shall be returned to the Commission. Further payments to the Governments and international organizations shall be suspended where they fail to report on the distribution of funds to successful claimants or fail to return undistributed funds on time.”

#### Fund releases by UNCC

On the UNCC website, release of funds for successful claimants showed to have been reported initially on April 22, 1999. In my long years of following up the payments, I still couldn't find the dates of fund releases prior to the initial date shown. From April 1999 until the latest release dated July 19, 2001 (very recent, take note), the UNCC has made 13 releases of compensation money, now totaling to US\$12.6 billion. The dates mentioned are: April 22, 1999; July 8, 1999; September 23, 1999; October 14, 1999; November 1, 1999; February 17, 2000; March 17, 2000; June 8, 2000; September 6, 2000; October 26, 2000; January 25, 2001; May 17, 2001; and July 19, 2001.

Out of these 13 fund releases, only once – on February 17, 2000 – was the Philippines included among those countries given funds by the UNCC!

Suspended or not suspended?

The recent expose' of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) reported that PCCCS Secretary General Bayani Mangibin vehemently denied that the Philippine government was ever suspended by the UNCC. The same way that PCCCS Deputy Secretary General Sinforiano Mendiola denied, when I asked him during a face-to-face interview held in Manila last July 21, 2000.

According to PCIJ's Alecks Pabico, Mangibin, when confronted with the issue, slipped and admitted that the Philippines was indeed suspended. But the suspension didn't hold for long, he claimed!

Suspended or not suspended, the fact remains that thousands of Filipino claimants, who all received initial payments in 1997, are still awaiting release of their full payments by the PCCCS officials. The fund has long been released by the UNCC – on February 17, 2000 to be exact – yet majority of these claimants are still not receiving any single penny.

My wild guess? The Philippines has been suspended alright by the UNCC, countless times, I should say. As the deadline set by the UNCC had already lapsed (within one year after receiving the fund – released, as repeatedly mentioned, on February 17, 2000) the PCCCS was not looking for another suspension after having been suspended in the past. It happened before, it can happen again. Meanwhile, it keeps in the bank the US\$15.5 million it received since early 2000. How much interest, do you think, has it incurred since then? The claimants? Ah . . . they can wait!

Poor Filipino claimants, victims indeed of their own government officials – DFA officials, who, in the first place, are supposed to protect their rights!

Dr. Fawzi is right, these officials are no less cruel than the Iraqi invaders of Kuwait. But I would say that these officials are worse than the Iraqi invaders!

OFW-Suite101, in the past 14 months, has extensively covered the subject on the compensation claims by Filipino victims of the 1990-1991 Invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War. For more detailed information, please visit the following articles:

On Gulf war comp claims – published on May 2, 2000 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 1 – June 6, 2000  
<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 2 – July 4, 2000  
<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Pinoy Gulf War claims, an update – October 3, 2000 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

UNCC completes payments to Pinoy claimants – November 7, 2000  
<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

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## **On overseas Filipinos' right to vote**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 17, 2001

THE media, nowadays, is buzzing with talks on overseas Filipinos' right to vote – and this, despite the more glaring news of one newly-elected senator's alleged involvement in drug trafficking and money laundering activities and the recent attempt to establish the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) by way of a plebiscite, has made well-known newspaper columnists to feast on the subject.

The current frenzy has actually been fired off by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's mention, in her first State of the Nation Address or SONA, of the overseas Filipinos' right to suffrage. In that July



23, 2001 feisty address, she asked the 12th Congress to enact a law allowing the overseas Filipinos to vote.

It is indeed ironic that in such a democratic country as the Philippines, one sector, comprising seven million qualified voters – the overseas Filipinos – has been left out in the exercise of one of the fundamental rights of her citizenry. It is not that the overseas Filipinos, per se, are not allowed to vote. They are, of course, but the mechanism to put their right into action has never been concretized since the amendment of the Philippine Constitution in 1987. Article IV, Section 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines states:

“The Congress shall provide a system for securing the secrecy and sanctity of the ballot as well as a system for

absentee voting by

qualified Filipinos abroad.”

To those of us overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who have been unaware – after all we are far away from the country and too busy earning a living – of the goings-on in the process of passing or enacting laws that would govern our motherland Philippines, the first question which comes to mind, once confronted with the above-given fact, is: “What the hell have those elected lawmakers been doing all this time?” For it is now 14 years, indeed, since the Constitution provided that absentee voting right to the overseas Filipinos and how come only now a President is vocally asking the Congress to enact a law? Something is really wrong in here!

Certain members of both the House of Representatives and Senate, of course, have authored a number of Absentee Voting (AV) bills in the past, with President Macapagal-Arroyo, herself, at one time, proposing a similar one to the Senate. Some got read and deliberated upon, like the House Bill 10720 and Senate Bill 1746, which have almost reached the last stage preparatory to final enactment by the 11th Congress. The early events leading to former President Estrada’s removal from Malacanang, accordingly, have prevented the proposed bills to be enacted into law. Campaigners then were eyeing for the May 2001 elections to be the first of those voting exercises to be enjoyed by overseas Filipinos.

The overseas Filipinos, themselves, have been actively working on their fundamental right to suffrage. The first group to be recognized as relentless campaigners of the AV bills is Europe-based Platform of Filipino Migrant Organisations in Europe or simply Platform. Its member organizations originate from Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Germany, Greece, The Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and Ireland.

In August 1998, the group sent 20 representatives to the Philippines in what it termed as “Platform Advocacy Delegation Visit to the Philippines” and successfully held dialogues with then President Estrada, members of the House of Representatives and Senate and a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Presented by the group was its “Migrant Agenda” with absentee voting as one of its concerns. This was repeated in August 2000.

This year, specifically on August 19 to 23, an “Overseas Filipinos Advocacy Visit to the Philippines 2001” will unfold, ably organized by Platform in cooperation this time with EMPOWER-The Global Campaign on Overseas Voting and the Philippine-based eLagda, Inc. and KAKAMMPI or Kapisanan ng mga Kamag-anak ng Migranteng Manggagawang Pilipino. The delegation, comprising over 50 overseas Filipinos from Europe, America, Middle East and Asian countries, will, foremost, seek public commitment or official pronouncement from President Macapagal-Arroyo and the 12th Congress for immediate legislation on the Overseas Voting. A one-day forum is scheduled just to discuss about this voting right and non-participating overseas Filipinos are urged to join by way of sending emails or texts to KAKAMMPI officials.

On the Internet, which is now the OFWs’ fastest link to their families and friends back home and abroad, electronic lists or groups and mails also abound with the subject and other matters pertaining to eventual passing of AV bills. Sentiments range from aggressive pronouncements to complacent or non-committal stance among overseas Filipinos, and everyday, more and more people are being caught up in the on-going discussions.

One such body is the OFW-Vote, one of Overseas Filipinos Worldwide’s community of lists. As early as now, plans are being discussed on how the actual electoral process will be conducted, that is, in preparation for the May 2004 elections. Serving as its main campaign in reaching all the overseas Filipino citizens, the Overseas Filipinos Worldwide has sent out, early this year, a Petition Letter which is currently going around.

OFW-Suite101 is joining the campaign and I would like to encourage readers and supporters of this OFW topic to sign the Petition (as presented below) and to spread the word around. Overseas Filipinos are also encouraged to join the main OFW-Vote mailing list and the fast-sprouting geographical links, and become a part of a working group which will later on be established in specific voting areas abroad. To join, please go to Overseas Filipinos Worldwide.

Nothing can stop us now to enjoy our only right to become active players in the affairs of our beloved country. Let us not just be hailed as economic saviors, or modern-day heroes, let us also, and most importantly, be taken seriously this time by our country’s leaders and lawmakers! Let us not rest until we get that

right to suffrage. It is high time that we choose those who we believe are best able to look after our affairs, as well as those of our loved ones!

#### PETITION LETTER OF OVERSEAS FILIPINOS TO THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT ON OUR RIGHT TO VOTE

WE, Filipinos working outside the Philippines, strongly urge President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, members of the Administration Party, the Opposition and all prospective Legislators in the 12th Congress, to prioritize and ensure the passage of a law that will allow us to exercise our inalienable right to vote, a right that is enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution.

The Philippine Congress has, in fact, been mandated by the Constitution to pass a law enabling overseas Filipinos to participate in electing officials that would run our country. Article V, Section 2 states that "Congress shall provide a system for securing the secrecy and sanctity of the ballot as well as a system for absentee voting by qualified Filipinos abroad."

In this age of a globalized economy, we have made our mark in the world as "internationally shared human resources." We have certainly made our mark in the Philippine economy: in 1999 alone our remittances totaled \$7 billion, an amount equivalent to a fifth of the country's total export earnings for that year. For this we have been hailed as "modern-day heroes" by politicians and the media.

But we find this to be little more than empty rhetoric. The reality is that we are forced by economic circumstances to labor far from home, to save our families from poverty and starvation.

The Philippine Government, meanwhile, profits from the sweat of our toil through the billions of dollars generated annually from our remittances and fees. And yet no clear mechanism exists to ensure the protection and promotion of our rights as migrant workers. This fact alone, if nothing else, makes it imperative for the Philippine Government to hasten the process in all government levels to ensure that we may exercise our right to vote in the soonest time possible.

We demand that Congress deliberate and approve an enabling law for Absentee Voting at the earliest possible opportunity. We also demand that the appropriate government bodies, OFW representation, and Congress ensure that our voices are heard regarding issues we face as overseas Filipino workers.

**OUR CALL TO ACTION:** We cannot allow the government who calls us "modern-day heroes" to continue to deprive us of this very basic right. We want this May Elections to be the last time we will be denied

our right to Suffrage. Although the next election is still three years away, passing an enabling law is just the first step in making this a reality. There is still a lot of work to be done.

Signed:

Special request from Overseas Filipinos Worldwide: PLEASE COPY this on to a new email message, sign the bottom (NAME, EMAIL, ORGANIZATION (if any) and LOCATION, and forward it to everyone on your distribution lists. If you receive this list with more than 100 names on it, please e-mail a copy of it to: OFW-Vote@yahoogroups.com or OFW-Vote-owner@yahoogroups.com

(Send after every 100 names.) Even if you decide not to sign, please be considerate and do not kill the petition. We will be running this petition until December 8, 2001.

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## **Too many a fight . . .**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 24, 2001

FIGHT! Fight for your right! Stand up and don't allow anybody to step on you. You are a person, a human being with all the good things entwined, as anybody else!

Those are the words inculcated in my brain from the earliest time I was made aware of my 'being' up to this very moment.

Life is a struggle indeed with its many bumps and curves, all God-given adversities to make us strong. Yet no matter how we try to believe in nature's kindness, we always end up frustrated and angry. For indeed, bullies abound!

A fighter, early on

A fighter, I am, yes, and one who wouldn't just easily give up! And all my life I've been just like that – and as far back a time as when I was a toddler. Let me tell you a story. . .

When I was a teenager, struggling with my identity – too young to be old, as my parents used to admonish me – I had this good chance of talking heart-to-heart with my father. He told me that he believed in his heart that I will grow to be a brave and strong woman someday, someone who will never allow any obstacle to block her way. How did you know that, I asked him then. He related an incident which transpired when I was three years old.

One day, he said, I was happily playing with a ball, a new toy recently acquired. The ball went far to the wall, underneath a display cabinet. I ran to the ball, peeped through the narrow space and tried to grab it with my tiny hand. I couldn't reach the ball! I tried and tried and still couldn't reach it. My parents who were in the living room decided to leave me alone upon my father's prompt. They went to their bedroom and left the door slightly open so they can observe me.

I tried to squeeze by body underneath the cabinet but it won't fit. Normally, for a child my age, I would have come to seek for help, my father said. But I didn't. Maybe I was afraid to leave the ball or maybe that's how I was – a stubborn child, as I was already branded then! My parents saw me stand up and look around. I then walked to the corner of the wall on the far left side of the cabinet where a broom was resting. I grabbed the broom, ran back to the cabinet, went tummy-flat on the floor and pushed the stick-end part of the broom until it reached the ball. Then out came the ball from the right opening side of the cabinet and rolled just in front of my parents' door! Sweating but happy, I pushed the door and ran straight to them showing off my accomplishment!

From then on, my father told me, my life had been filled with independent struggles and each time I emerged a winner. It didn't matter how big or small the fight was, I was relentless, my father proudly told me, because of my stubborn attitude of not easily giving up. Yet, I was always patient and wouldn't ever consider momentary obstacle a failure. In all my tasks, I just kept on going and going and won't stop until I accomplished whatever I've set my mind into. But never would I ask for something impossibly gargantuan. I seemed to have an extraordinary grasp of life's possibilities yet I have always believed that nothing is impossible if you really work your heart and mind into it.

### Life's major fights

Four of the many major fights I had in life happened during my OFW (overseas Filipino worker) stint in Kuwait. Two are work-related and the other two are personal, the last one concerns my health and a very recent one. There's another major struggle brewing up, but I would like to discuss it separately.

In early 1994, bothered with a nagging frustration of having stripped off of my indemnity pay from an institution which I've served selflessly during the most tiring times in the history of Kuwait, I decided to file a formal complaint. The normal way for the gripe to be taken to – then and now – is the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. This I was made to understand enough while asking around on how I can go about the complaint. Something made me skip this and instead I went straight to the Human Rights Committee of Kuwait's National Assembly (Parliament).

As soon as I started with the preliminary proceedings, I was discouraged left and right by those immediately surrounding me. Three significant men were behind me though. First was the man who later became my husband; second was my immediate boss, Head Teacher Brian Errington of The English School where I changed employment in 1992; and third, the head of the Philippines' Diplomatic Mission to Kuwait in the person of then Ambassador Shulan O. Primavera.

On that fateful day – February 21, 1994 – I was to go to the Parliament to submit my complaint, I was nervous as you can imagine one would be in the same situation. I almost turned my back, believe me, but I braved myself and thought about my late father. I also thought about those three men who believed so much in me.

My initial meeting with MP Ahmed Nassar, chairman of the Human Rights Committee of the Parliament, although brief, was smooth and uneventful. He politely accepted my papers, handed them over to his secretary and outrightly informed me that he'll see me the following Monday for the Committee hearing.

#### Committee hearing

Days passed by quickly and on the scheduled day, I found myself facing the Committee. There was a microphone in front of me and an interpreter seated nearby. As the members, one of those was the staunch leader MP Ahmad Baqquer who is currently the Minister of Justice, were already briefed, I was just made to relate my complaints briefly. I was told beforehand that I will be given no more than a 20-minute audience. After a few questions asked and answered, nervously, by me (who wouldn't be nervous anyway, facing those big men of Kuwait's Parliament), I was soon asked to stand and was ushered out politely by an aide.

Long story short, in the end, I got what I fought for! Who said that you can't steer those high and mighty institutions? I mean both – the one which aggrieved me and the other which I took my grievances to!

The second work-related fight is still new and is very sensitive at the moment. I wouldn't go into details but please know that I also got what I fought for and I continue to hope that no other obstacles will

come my way as a result of this latest stir. I love my work and I wouldn't dream of losing it, taking into consideration, that is, the sole responsibility I face of looking after a big and extended family.

The main purpose of relating this story is to inspire others to fight for their rights and not to falter, once started. You should go on, empower yourself by acquiring knowledge – a knowledge of your limitations, a must – and don't just give up! As I've always told those who have come to me in the past and those who I've met lately on cyberspace:

If you know and really believe that what you're into is right, then go on and fight! Be not afraid and remember that RIGHT will always WIN over WRONG!

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## **Pinoy claimants air grievances**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: September 7, 2001

IN a bid to formalize complaints arising from delayed distribution by a special Philippine government body of compensation approved for payment by the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC), a small group of overseas Filipino claimants sent last August 19, 2001 a letter to President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Timed purposely with the Advocacy Visit to the Philippines by selected overseas Filipino workers and migrants, the complaints were made public during a dialogue held last August 21 at the premises of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in Manila.

Present during the dialogue were officials of the main Philippine government departments and agencies involved in the affairs of the overseas Filipinos. These officials were Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Secretary Patricia Sto. Tomas, DOLE Undersecretary Manuel Imson, DFA Undersecretary Merlin Magallona, Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) Administrator Rosalinda Baldoz, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Deputy Administrator Delmer Cruz and Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) Executive Director Jose Molano.

Tasked by the claimants to represent them was the Overseas Filipinos Worldwide Net Foundation, Inc., through its Managing Director Dr. Rachele Garcia. Dr. Garcia, fortunately, was given a special time to read the letter. In an email she sent to the group – Pinoy Gulf War Claimants Club – Dr. Garcia related the following:

“Anyway, everyone listened intently to your letter. Be assured that I did not edit it nor “soften” any of the words used. I read it the way it was written (and the people present congratulated me after as they thought I was “brave” to read it as is). Well, I did so because it is high time that the issue is discussed with both parties present (with our group representing our ‘kababayans’ in Kuwait). Fortunately, Mr. Bayani “Bani” V. Mangibin, the Secretary-General of the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCCS), was there. He answered your allegations point by point (but didn’t delve into specifics as he didn’t have some documents with him). However, he gave everyone present tabulations of the update on Gulf War claims (for the First and Second Phases of Payments, as of July 31, 2001).”

For information, the full text of the letter, addressed to Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, is hereunder presented:

August 19, 2001

Dear President Arroyo:

Warm greetings from Kuwait!

We are a small portion of the over 40,000 claimants of the Gulf War Compensation approved for payments by the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC). We have been victims of corrupt practices of certain government officials manning the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCCS) under the Department of Foreign Affairs. Our efforts in the past to curtail the anomalies committed to us had all been fruitless and we continue to suffer while the officials concerned remain untouched and unabated in making use of our money which should have been given to us years before. For this reason, we come to you now, believing in your honest pronouncement that you will curb graft and corruption within the government bodies.

The deliberate delay of payments of our claims is the main injustice we suffer from the corrupt PCCCS officials. All the rest of our problems stems from this anomalous practice. The officials are holding the fund for as long as they can, which, had actually resulted to the Philippines being suspended by the UNCC. The last release made by the UNCC, the only one, in fact, the Philippines got in the past 28 months – in the amount of US\$15.5 million – was February 17, 2000. PCCCS personnel started sending out notices in October 2000 and majority of the claimants, until now, are not in receipt of the notices. Notices of those whose claims amount to high figures are being held while those with lesser figures had been sent ahead of schedule. UNCC has ruled that payments are to be distributed to claimants in order of approval by the Panel of Commissioners.



Lately, the PCCCS officials resorted to scheduling payments in batches. Despite their confirmation of names as among those recipients of the latest UNCC fund release, they still refuse to pay until the claimants receive their respective notices. Yet these notices the officials regularly claim to have been sent are nowhere to be found! Please know that there are cases where claimants can attest to the fact that their notices were found lying idle in their trays! These incidents happened between 1997 to 2000, during which time the PCCCS distributed in a turtle-like-pace the UNCC release of the first batch of payments to Filipino claimants!

Claimants have been, and still are, easy preys to fixers proliferating unabated within the PCCC vicinity. Some of these fixers are from the PCCCS itself and PCCCS Secretary General Bayani Mangibin admitted, in an interview with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, that one staff member had been lately terminated when discovered.

There are those cases of claimants not receiving any single penny until now because their checks are nowhere to be found. The PCCCS officials are always quick to answer that the checks had all been returned to the UNCC because of the payees' failure to claim the checks! How can you claim a check when you didn't receive any notice?

Some rightful claimants are now doomed to "non-compensated status" because of their checks having been claimed by others. A lot of cases even go as far back as 1993 to 1995 when claimants' papers had been kept unattended by the DFA officials. Those files were returned by the UNCC for completion of some paper requirements and would have been consequently approved had the DFA officials informed the claimants. More than 5,000 claimants are affected by this unfortunate incident.

A lot more were either uninformed or misinformed by the DFA officials of their privilege to seek compensation from the UNCC. The people affected are those who were immediately absorbed for employment by other countries. Nearly 50,000 Filipinos were evacuated then and most of them found new employment in Asia, America, Europe and other areas in the Middle East not affected by the Gulf War. They never got the chance to claim for their losses, a privilege only enjoyed by Filipino workers who returned to Kuwait after the Invasion. Yet, even those who were in Kuwait were not all timely informed as most had filed claims past the January 1, 1995 schedule of non-acceptance of individual claims by the UNCC!

We would not want to go further into lengthy recounts of our sufferings, our dear Madame President. Suffice it to say that what we have been through in the hands of our government officials are no less cruel than what we had been through the hands of the Iraqi invaders! We are indeed twice victims!

It is not only the desire to get what we rightfully own from the PCCCS – a reality which actually drove us to seek your assistance – it is also now the conviction that those officials responsible for the misuse of the compensation fund be punished. These officials are only added smear to your relentless effort in freeing our government from corrupt practices. We would want them removed from their office so they may no longer spread their corrupt wings!

We thank you for hearing us and we all look forward to a positive intervention by your good self. You are now our only hope and we would like to wake up one day with the realization that for once in our OFW lives, a President of our beloved Philippines, has finally come to our rescue!

Please, Madame President, do not deny us that right, that privilege and allow us to add to your SONA's endearing end pronouncement our own motto: "Let us do what is right. Let us do what is best. Let us leave to God the rest . . . then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo will sure act in haste!"

We are attaching herewith helpful information for your easy reference. The UNCC data presented have all been carefully researched and now actually serve as our only weapon against the lies and misinformation that the PCCCS officials have been subjecting us, and other people, into in the past six years or so.

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## **OFWs among victims of terrorist attack**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: September 24, 2001

AS top absorber of Philippine labor, the United States of America, employ as many as four million Filipinos, naturalized individuals and family members included. It is no wonder that Filipino workers were among the thousands of people reported missing – and presumably dead by now – after that unprecedented and tragic attack of terrorists in America last September 11, 2001.

Official report coming from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) in Manila states that around 18 Filipinos, as of September 21, have been reported victims of the recent tragedy in America. Two were confirmed dead, passenger each of two of the four hijacked planes. Ruben Ornedo, 39, of Los Angeles, California, was a Boeing propulsion engineer who was on board the American Airlines Flight 77, from Washington to Los Angeles which crashed into the Pentagon. Ronald Gamboa, 33, of Los Angeles,

California, was a Gap store manager and on board the United Airlines Flight 175, from Boston, Massachusetts, to Los Angeles, California, the second hijacked plane to strike the World Trade Center.

Those officially reported missing, as gathered by the Philippine Consulate General in New York from the Family Assistance Center of New York City's Mayor's Office, are: Cesar Alviar, Marlyn Bautista, Grace Alegre Cua, Jay Ciril Dichavez, Benilda Domingo, Judy Fernandez, Bernardo Gallardo, Ramon Grihalvo, Frederick Kuo, Jr., Arnold Lim, Manuel Lopez, Carl Allen Peralta, Rufino Flores Santos, Maritess Santillan, David N. Sullins (Fil-American), Larry Sumaya, Hector Tamayo, and Cynthia Motus-Wilson (earlier reported as Cynthia Betia or Betita).

CNN's database of missing persons, as submitted by families and friends of those missing, reveal quite a number of Filipino-sounding names and those with photos are easily identifiable as Filipinos. As more people become aware of the victims' list, wherein photos and/or vital identifying information can be submitted by anyone who is aware of a missing loved one, it is fairly expected that the number of Filipino victims will still increase. A brief visit to the site earlier showed more new faces, a significant increase in the entries as compared to yesterday's list of missing persons.

Looking at those faces and faceless names, one can't really help but feel sad and angered as I had been at the very first instance I saw the initial few photos shown on the site. I still can't believe that such a barbaric act could happen to one civilized world, and to the greatest of all nations!

What has happened in America, I believe, can happen anywhere. We are all vulnerable to this kind of an attack. It doesn't really matter which country we are stationed because terrorists are everywhere. If they managed to actualize an obviously well planned operation of attack on America and its multi-national people, these terrorists and/or terrorist network are/is widespread, that anytime, a simultaneous attack of the same or less proportion as that which transpired recently in America can materialize. And this can possibly happen even before America can stage its well announced war against these terrorists!

Should this happen, what will become of us overseas Filipino workers? Should we go back to our country or should we stay put where we are now?

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# Rolly's gift to overseas Filipinos

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: October 30, 2001

INSPIRED by his own experience as an overseas worker, Roland "Rolly" Amaranto has created a masterpiece – a collection of songs he composed – which now serves as his lifetime gift to all Filipinos working abroad.

A gift of love. That's how Rolly says of his outstanding work.

Aptly titled "Awit Abroad — Para Sa Inyo, OFW Ng Buong Mundo" (Songs Abroad – For All Of You, OFW Of The World), the music album has recently been released in the Gulf and the Middle East, where Rolly is working as a secretary of a multi-national firm, particularly in Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. There are 10 songs in the album, beautifully rendered by famous Filipino singers such as Nora Aunor, Claudine Barreto, Nonoy Zuniga, Juan Rodrigo, Miriam Pantig, Jo Awayan, Cindy Rosas, Kelly Grace Salcedo, Aldoe Rubee and Richard Villanueva.

The songs highlight the difficult life an OFW faces, as experienced by Rolly, himself. Having had to go through the loneliness of being separated, though temporary, from his loved ones, Rolly took refuge by singing and strumming his guitar, thus giving him the chance to express his pent-up emotions. It was sort of a therapy for him, enabling him to go through his day-to-day existence. At night where one would ordinarily be sound asleep, Rolly would stay awake, dreaming of his family left behind in the Philippines. At times he would feel his tears welling and those were the times he would always feel the need to sing and strum his guitar.

In one of those lonely nights, Rolly thought of creating his own song. Although not a composer, he ventured into song-writing, first as his way of coping up with his difficult situation. Later, he discovered that he was more relieved of his temporary and momentary longings if he vocalized his own feelings. The words uttered, while singing impromptu, were soon put into writing until he actually composed one full song. In a span of five years, he managed to collect over 10 original compositions.

Rolly actually didn't think of going public about his 'amateurish' songs. After all, they were just serving him to cope up with his own loneliness. Not until year 2000, when it was declared as "Year of the OFWs", that Rolly thought of sharing his songs. He got inspired and bold enough to go out of his nutshell and immediately saw an opportunity to share his own work in celebration of the year-long event.

Immediately, Rolly contacted Rhoel Mendoza. Rhoel, through his Philippines to the World Entertainment Foundation, Inc. (PWEFI) based in Riyadh, was responsible for the declaration of year 2000 as 'Year of OFWs.' Talking to Rhoel finally sealed Rolly's conviction to go public. That was March 2000.

By July 2000, during his annual leave to the Philippines, Rolly put into action his plan. With the help of his brother Raffy and friend Ric Santos, all the songs he composed were recorded and put into a demo CD, which in turn, was presented to various Filipino artists. Months passed by and in March 2001, the full album was finally released in the Philippines.

Producers of the album, POPPSINC Philippines and Artistika Records Philippines, have launched the album last September 28 in Saudi Arabia, through Stallions Records. Within a week following the official launch, the albums were simultaneously made available in the Gulf countries as well as the neighboring Middle East and African countries. Soon the album will be launched in Asia, Europe and America.

The songs

AKING MAHAL (My Love), interpreted emotionally by superstar NORA AUNOR, relates a woman's anxieties over her loved one's journey to foreign shores. The painful longing, but full of promises for a better future, is evoked deeply in the song. A mellow soft tune.

I DO is a sweet song by a loyal girlfriend, rendered by CLAUDINE BARRETO . The song speaks of an overwhelming gaiety of a young heart whose patience so unparalleled in waiting for her lover finally pays off. This is the only English song in the album.

We feel the extreme desire of a melancholy heart for a loved one in MAKAPAGHANAPBUHAY LANG (Just To Have A Job) by NONOY ZUNIGA. The interpreter appreciated the piece so much, claiming the song was really well-thought of, a product of both wit and emotion. This is a pop-song with a shade of blues.

The family takes centerpoint as a moral booster in the song KABAYAN HUWAG MAG-ALALA (My Countryman Don't Worry) by JUAN RODRIGO. The nostalgic feeling, quite universal in nature, is deeply etched in the song. This song has a sweet jazzy tune.

MIRIAM PANTIG gives her OFW emotion in the ballad song MAAYOS NA BUHAY (A Better Life) which rages over unspoken sufferings and sacrifices. Amidst a hurting milieu, the realization of a dream is the only thing that holds dear to someone to continue living a drab life.

Over time takes ambivalent meanings in the song O.T. giddily interpreted by ALDOE RUBEE. Here, the Filipino sense of humor surfaces in times of trials. This song has a rock and roll beat.

Acculturation embraces a pedantic touch in the song RAMADAN, brought to life by RICHARD VILLANUEVA. The uninformed OFW is given caution to keep up with a Muslim tradition and discipline, and to respect them. A little fast tempo with combination of rap.

One feels the echoes of a ghastly wind and the rage of turbulent sea in the song DOON (There) by CINDY ROSAS. The swing dance rhythm of the song seems to sway with the rippling waters on the shore. A song for the seamen.

JO AWAYAN and MIRIAM PANTIG blend beautifully in PARA SA INYO, OFW NG BUONG MUNDO (For All Of You, OFW Of The World), the theme song of the album, a tribute to all the OFWs worldwide whose tool for survival are brains, talents and physical power. With upbeat tempo, a “come on” song for OFWs.

KELLY GRACE SALCEDO and NONOY ZUNIGA move with passion and pride in demonstrating to all and sundry the greatness of OFWs in the song DAKILA KA (You Are Great), which these Filipino modern day heroes truly exemplify.

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## The fight continues, Part 1

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: November 30, 2001

IN my ‘Too many a fight’ article published August 24, 2001, I mentioned that “there’s another major struggle brewing up, but I would like to discuss it separately.” Time really flies, and how FAST, and one would really miss noticing it if faced with a lot of challenges in life, as I am. That particular fight is on the rights of Filipinos affected by the 1990-1991 Gulf War to their compensation awarded by the United Nations Compensation Commission which was denied far longer than necessary.

Followers of the OFW-Suite101 topic are aware of the Gulf War compensation mess which I boldly exposed and relentlessly followed up in the past 18 months or so. The seven related stories I wrote since May 2000 – this now will be the eighth – will prove to this claim. Those interested to learn more may visit the following links:

On Gulf war comp claims – published on May 2, 2000 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 1 – June 6, 2000  
<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Pinoy Gulf War claims: facts and figures, Part 2 – July 4, 2000  
<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Pinoy Gulf War claims, an update – October 3, 2000 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

UNCC completes payments to Pinoy claimants – November 7, 2000  
<http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/over...>

Worse than Iraqi invaders – published on August 2, 2001 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/3728...>

Pinoy claimants air grievances – September 7, 2001 <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/3728...>

PCCCS responds to complaints

Following the public reading last August 21, 2001 of the Filipino claimants' letter of complaint addressed to Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo during a dialogue between key government officials and a small group of representative overseas Filipinos at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) premises in Manila, an official response from the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCCS) was received. The response was religiously followed up, on behalf of the Filipino claimants, by the Overseas Filipinos Worldwide Net Foundation, Inc., based in Manila, in particular, by Dr. Rachele Garcia. For clarity, I am taking full liberty of publishing the letter, as follows:

14 September 2001

Madam:

With reference to your joint letter to her Excellency President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo dated 19 August 2001 concerning the payment of the Gulf War compensation, I wish to clarify on the following concerns you mentioned in the said letter.

A. "Deliberate delay of payment of our claims ..." Please be informed that PCCCS never intentionally delayed the release of the Gulf War compensations to the bonafide claimants. The Office started paying war compensations in May 1997 when it first received a fund remittance from the UNCC. Subsequent tranches were expeditiously released to the claimants after the processors/representatives from the Department of Justice, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration, and Philippine Information Agency have established the identity of the claimant.

The claimants who are able to present the required documents are paid the amount authorized by the UNCC accordingly. However, in many instances, some claimants cannot readily submit to the processors valid documents (passports, travel documents used during the Gulf War) or other documents to establish that they are indeed the rightful owners of the war compensation. This delays the release of the check payments.

Attached are copy each of the UNCC payment history to the Philippines by category and by date of remittance to indicate the continuous remittance of payment of Gulf War claims. Also, enclosed is the updated status of the first two phases of payments on Gulf War claims.

For your information, the average number of claim checks being released per day starting August and September 2001 ranges from 300 to 400 compared to the previous 100 to 150 per day. PCCCS starts its service exactly at 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. without lunch break and many staff members work overtime up to 8 P.M. everyday to ensure that the attached "Tentative Schedule of Appointments" is achieved with a hope that phase 2 of the Gulf War payment will be finished by mid-October 2001 and PCCCS could be moved up to phase three for the full payment of categories "D", "E", and "F". PCCCS also hopes to locate the more than 7,000 Gulf War claimants under category "A" Installments 4 and 5.

Attached is the status of the Gulf War claims of the persons who conveyed their concern through a letter to Her Excellency President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.



B. "Claimants have been, and still are, easy preys to fixers proliferating unabated within PCCCS..." The PCCSC is not aware of the existence of "fixers" in the office. PCCCS Secretary General Bayani Mangibin must have been misquoted in his interview with the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), that one staff member had been lately terminated when discovered. There was not a single staff member who has been found guilty of any irregularity much less dismissed from the service. There is, however, one representative from one of the five participating government agencies who is presently under investigation as a result of a complaint under oath filed by one claimant. It would be appreciated if your group could help us identify any corrupt official or employee in the PCCCS in order to take immediate action.

C. "There are those

cases of claimants not receiving a single penny until now because their check are nowhere to be found." There was not a single check lost in the PCCCS. The payment checks are prepared after the beneficiary has been duly identified. The PCCCS has not lost a check since it started paying the war compensations. Rest assured that the PCCCS always does its best in discharging its mandate.

Very truly yours,

(Signed) MERLIN M. MAGALLONA Supervising Undersecretary, PCCCS

## Denials

After reading the above letter and going through the attachments, I remember feeling the more angered. The outright denial of the claimants' pronouncement that the PCCCS officials resorted to 'deliberate delay of paying the compensation' was that which made me mad. Mr. Magallona's statement contradicted the 'Payments History' he sent as attachment. I can see no reason why a claimant would take six months to one year, as shown in the table, to produce the necessary documents if he/she was informed immediately of the availability of compensation funds. If you were a claimant, aware that the UNCC has started paying compensation since six to seven years back, will you not be prepared to present your papers when notified early or immediately of your approved claims? I, for one, when notified, nearly one year from PCCCS' receipt of the fund from the UNCC as I noted in the PCCCS attachment, immediately flew to Manila. And this despite my earlier trip, three months back, to the Philippines!

The delay of payments was admitted alright by the PCCCS official but that it was claimed to be "never intentionally" delayed. He should tell this to the most stupid and dumb person but not to those who actually experienced, and still are, the gross delay of its release of payments.

Mr. Alecks Pabico, the reporter of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) has this to say on Mr. Magallona's denial of the 'fixers' activities within the PCCCS:

"pls find below the transcript of my interview with sec-gen mangibin. this is to dispel the notion that he was misquoted, as claimed by usec magallona, and reveals other pertinent issues the pccc has not been able to explain thoroughly. the fact is, he's also been recorded on camera (abs-cbn) saying such things. now the dfa tries to cover up his statements by seeking refuge under trite excuses of being misquoted or taken out of context.

alecks"

Here's that part of the interview as taken from the transcript sent by Alecks:

Alecks: How about yung mga fixers daw within the PCCC? [How about those alleged fixers within the PCCC?]

Bayani Mangibin: Well, please give me the name. As long as under oath, by the way, meron na kaming isa na pinatangal... [by the way, we already have one dismissed]

A: Masud daw... [Masud, I gathered]

BM: I don't want to give the names kasi may karapatan din yung tao. [I don't want to give names because that person has also rights.]

A: Is he still under investigation?

BM: Wala na yung taong yun. Kasi nga under oath. So we are requesting the public, the claimants, please put it under oath para maaksyunan yan. Kasi may karapatan din naman yung mga tao, huwag naman natin basta sila akusahan. Meron din tayong due process na sana masunod natin. [That person is no longer here. Because under oath. So we are requesting the public, the claimants, please put it under oath so it can be acted upon. We have the due process which I hope we can all follow.]

You will read more about the issue as I continue with the fight . . .

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# The holiday that never was

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: January 14, 2002

AS I was thinking of what interesting subject to write about – I already missed the December slot – an idea popped up! I was actually reading through one of the copies of a posting I sent last Friday to a number of mailing lists I subscribe to when the idea came about. Why not, indeed? What I related to the group describes exactly the difficult yet challenging life of an OFW (overseas Filipino worker), the very topic of this page I maintain at Suite101.com!

Let me just mention a brief background. December 3, 2001 it was when I received an email from one of my sisters, mentioning, among others, that my mother, who had been lately declared a terminal case (she was diagnosed to be suffering from invasive ductal carcinoma of the breast in April 2001, less than a year after her right leg was amputated) was repeatedly asking for me. I couldn't immediately ask for a leave of absence from work as I already missed months of working time in the past year because of my twice hospitalizations and the subsequent quarterly follow-up checks at the Kuwait Cancer Control Center and the Daiya Diabetic Clinic. I needed to wait for the Christmas holiday.

December 12 was the last day of work at The English School where I work as a School Nurse. That night, I took a plane trip to Manila and was with my mother in the afternoon of December 14. I felt the time was moving very slow then. Had my most uncomfortable trip ever as I was forced to stay outside the terminal of Philippine Airlines anxious to catch the early 5 am first trip to Iloilo.

My mother's condition was really bad when I arrived. I thought she was dying. A week prior, one of her breast lesions burst out and she lost a lot of blood. She was white as a paper and she could hardly move. It was too much for me to take and I almost cried in front of her. Five days later, she asked to be taken out for a ride in her wheelchair! And that was after two bags of whole blood were transfused into her body, arranged to be done at home. I didn't want to take her to the hospital as I was afraid she won't leave the hospital alive!

When I left the Philippines

back to Kuwait on January 3, 2002, my mother was much much better than she was on the day I arrived. I even took her for a trip to the capital town of San Jose (of the province of Antique) for a promised sumptuous lunch in the morning of my night departure to Kuwait.

I would like now to share that posted message I mentioned earlier.

“Dear folks, all friends in the OFW Community of Lists, as well as my special cyberkada in the OFW Club and Pinoy Claimants Club: warm greetings to one and all!

“Please bear with me as I tell you a little ‘story’ – my way of sharing with you my ‘accomplishments’ during my very recent HOLIDAY in our beloved Philippines!

“It could have been one memorable HOLIDAY of a lifetime – what with the ideal timing of Christmas and the New Year – save for the lack of proper sleep and rest, which are, of course, major ingredients of an ideal HOLIDAY!

“Primarily, I went home because of my ailing mother. That, I already related in my previous posting. Attending personally to my Mom at the verge of a near-death condition is a privilege I will always cherish in my career as a nurse. What could have been more fulfilling than to care for your very own mother? I’m lucky in that I also had the good chance of nursing my Mom back to health during her ‘leg amputation’ experience in May 2000.

“Why should you leave? That was Mama asking me when I kissed her goodbye on the day I was to return to Kuwait. I have to go back to work, I said, so you may continue to get well and live long enough to see the fulfillment of my dream of making all your children’s life better! You once dreamed about it, remember? I’m here now to fulfill that dream.

“In-between attending to Mama, I was also busy doing so many things all at the same time. I accomplished the following:

– gathered all my siblings together (six of us) for Christmas eve. It was one celebration we will all cherish in our lifetime. With Mama still weak but happily beaming as she sat in her wheelchair, surrounded by all of her children and grandchildren (only the children of my eldest sister in Marikina were not able to come), she distributed gifts to everybody. I made sure that everybody got his/her gift, specially and patiently wrapped by me. Aside from the exchange gift, which I also practically financed, even those

working for me, and those nieces and nephews (from first cousins) residing near our compound, received their share – all handed over by Mama. At one point, there was one she fancied and before the rightful owner came near, she already opened the box! We all laughed! She must have thought that there was not something coming for her for a long while! The funniest part was when I threw coins! You should see how everybody ran after the coins. I enjoyed it the most as I was the one seeing everybody scampered for a catch. My old Nanny (who's paralyzed from waist down) was overheard saying: "what a wonder! coins are coming from heaven!" She even asked me if I got some!;

– finished the tiling of a beach house (which my hubby and I will finally occupy in July 2002 for a real holiday). The outside wall and terrace, plus the waterbreaker, are still to be finished;

– changed the bathroom door and toilet bowl/wash basin of the house;

– fixed the outrigger of the pump boat which was destroyed last typhoon time and fine-tuned the engine ready for a trip out in the sea come "moonless" night;

– started the improvement of one rice paddy into a "tilapia" culture habitat;

– refinanced the fencing of the end-part of the land (original fund was 'used' by my sister) to protect the animals. One cow was boloed when it grazed a neighboring grassland – already a loss as the proceeds of the meat sale (happened a month prior to my trip home) went 'everywhere'. Lost two of the goats to 'grass poisoning', had eaten Mahogany leaves, according to the caretaker (I didn't know that Mahogany leaves are poison to animals!);

– renovated the boutique-cum-dress shop (which I opened May 2001) by adding more glass cabinets, glass encasement for the mannequin, glass wardrobe and glass stands. It gave the shop a "classy" look afterwards;

– fired the shop manager (one of my parents' 2 adopted daughters who went back to her biological parents when she was 15) as I discovered she was stealing money from me;

– fired my personal assistant, as, she, too, was discovered to have stolen a lot of money from me. She's the one entrusted with my checkbook;

- assigned my sister (next to me) as new shop manager and personal assistant, and needed to “fix” her. Gave her one of my hearing aids (as she’s also hard of hearing), financed her visit to a dentist, bought her a mobile phone, hired a nanny for her 6 children, bought her husband a welding machine, bought her a TV set, financed a cable connection and added more features to her new house which I built for her last year. Her humble nipa hut was washed away by the sea during that worst typhoon which hit Antique last year;
  
- increased salaries of all people under my employ. Hired two new people, one for the shop and another for the house, as regulars. Hired 2 part timers for the shop: a bookkeeper and an accountant;
  
- increased the personal allowance of my youngest sister who again had a relapse after confinement in a private asylum last May 2001. She gets “better” if she keeps cash with her, huh!;
  
- closed one of my two checking accounts, dollar account and joint account (with my adopted son) at the Philippine National Bank last December 28. Closed also my two sons’ ATM accounts;
  
- attended the “Layas nga Antiqueno” night held December 27 in the capital town of San Jose and was honored to meet the “Bugal kang Antique” awardees, with Bishop Tomas Millamena (of the Aglipayan Church) as one of those. Was tipped by one organizer to get ready as I will be one of the awardees in December 2002 Binirayan Festival celebrations;
  
- organized the families of the OFWs in Mapatag, my homeplace. My way of making up for my inability to attend the OFW gatherings in Manila;
  
- sponsored a basketball team led by my eldest son (he’s one hell of a basketball player, mind you!) and witnessed the team’s first win game. Was challenged afterwards to treat all team members and friends to a snack after the game. I didn’t watch anymore the succeeding games. Was afraid to be ‘challenged’ again by my youngest son to spend more money, LOL!
  
- ‘blessed’ quite a number of godchildren, nieces and nephews who all came to ask for their ‘Pamasko’;
  
- financed the doctor’s visit and medications of my adopted son’s father who’s suffering from gastric ulcer;

– received quite a number of carollers, all with advanced letters asking for special contribution to this project and that, whew!

– received solicitation letters for renovation of the church and elementary school in Mapatag, including a few coming from neighboring barrios; and

– paid salary advances of my Mom’s caretaker (to finish her house started from a previous cash advance), our house helper (for her daughter’s tuition fee), the pump boat’s operator and two of its workers, my two sisters (as shop’s personnel) and dressmaker.

“Reading the above, can someone argue with me re my earlier pronouncement that life of an OFW is a difficult one? Surely, I’m not the only one experiencing this difficult life!

“Relating to you the above is aimed at inspiring fellow OFWs to stay steadfast in their enforced responsibility over immediate and extended family. Remember always that we are here for a purpose. It is difficult alright but it’s what which keeps us going, di ba?

“I also pray that with this open announcement of my responsibilities in life, my job will stay. FYI, I’m now facing the danger of losing my job and God forbid . . . if I lost my job . . . what would become of my loved ones and those under my employ?

“Hope I didn’t bore you with my litany. And sorry if, to others, my post is out of the context.

“Your humble friend and co-OFW,

Freda in Kuwait.”

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# Coping with death

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: March 22, 2002

DEATH is inevitable. It can happen anytime, anywhere and whichever condition – either good or bad – we are in. Understanding this basic fact is one thing. But confronting death itself . . . ah. . . we just could not cope!

Hardly, if at all, does one cope with the loss of a loved one. And I believe everyone would agree with me.

But cope we all must. Citing from a very recent experience with this life's most dreaded and avoided phenomenon, I would like to highlight a few ways to consider when faced with death.

The first thing to remember is to allow your self the time to mourn or grieve. But by doing so, you should be careful not to stay long in this your temporary despair. Cry all you can and never control the tears whenever an opportunity comes along. Crying will actually free yourself of that heavy thing in your chest.

Think of the good death has given to your loved one. In the case of my mother's passing away, it helped me a lot in overcoming my initial grief by realizing that her death actually ended her suffering. Cancer, as you know, in its terminal stage, uses up whatever energy left in a person because of the characteristic pain. We wouldn't want of course to see our loved one suffer.

It is a big boost to know the stages of grief – denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – and realize that you are not exempt from undergoing each one of them. You may not go through the full stages in order, or one stage may be lacking, but as proven time and again, each one of us experiences the pattern.

When I was first confronted with my mother's death last February 19, I remember telling myself that this thing happens only to other people. I've been hearing in the past about relatives' and friends' death in their family and in those times, I never was able to reconcile with my own impending reality. I was actually undergoing the denial stage as early as then, as I was aware that my mother may soon pass away. I was seeing the signs yet I kept on denying it up to the last moment when death itself confronted me!



Anger was mostly directed towards my self. Yes, I was angry for not being able to take care of my mother during her last hospitalization, 11 days before she died at home. I was mad at my own health problem as it prevented me from running to her at the time she needed me most. I needed to meet an appointment for a full body CT scan at the Kuwait Cancer Control Center last February 12. I felt the more angry and guilty when I learned that my mother was continuously looking for me in the hospital. She must have wondered why I was not around. Had it not been for that pre-scheduled appointment, I could have been with her even before she was rushed to the hospital last February 4.

Bargaining stage was experienced way before the death of my mother. I remember praying fervently to God that last night, while I was dressing her breast lesions, to prolong her life. I promised God I will not leave my mother again until the end. I was bargaining for more time – maybe to make up for those lost times I was unable to stay with her in the past many years of working overseas.

Depression has been my constant companion since my own cancer diagnosis in the later part of year 2000. Acknowledging its on and off occurrence is something I have been accustomed to and I was ready when real depression set in as a result of losing my mother. I just allowed it to take its course. It took longer than I expected but I really didn't mind. I actually basked in its healing action, fully aware that it, too, shall pass.

I can't claim that I've fully accepted my mother's death. Not yet. But, one day soon, I know, I will successfully pass that final stage.

In all the above phases, you need someone who will stay with you all the time, someone who is ready to listen to you and to understand when it's time to hug you or just leave you alone. You also need friends who can tell you they care for you, who never fail to ask about you. And most importantly, you need work, to keep you busy and productive.

And last but not the least, you need God's comforting presence.

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# The fight continues, Part 2

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: May 30, 2002

PART 1 of this series was published November 30, 2001. Part 2 is published only today, six months later. It is out of the norm, I admit, but natural and circumstantial events followed one after another in my 'not-so-ordinary life' since November 2001 that writing a follow-up story on time was not just possible.

A lot has transpired in the Gulf War comp payments scenario itself that it will take two to three series more in order to fully cover the current status. I can of course summarize everything in one go but that would mean a longer-to-read page for you readers and followers of this series. I would guess you would prefer shorter versions. (Not too short though as I am required to at least write each time a story of no less than 400 words.)

In the previous story, I shared the official response of DFA Supervising Undersecretary (of PCCCS) Merlin Magallona to the letter of complaint sent to President Gloria M. Arroyo by a number of Filipino claimants in August 2001. Along with the response came "Payment History" by category and date of remittance from the UNCC and claims status of the initial 65 signatories of the complaint letter.

I would say that the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCS), headed by Secretary General Bayani Mangibin was too generous to reveal the information. I couldn't believe my luck at first, especially when I read and discovered the dates of remittance coming from the UNCC from the first batch in March 1997 up to August 2001. Right there in front of my eyes and then were the missing links to and dates of the UNCC payments to the Philippines, outside those published by the UNCC itself on its website! The missing data which I repeatedly looked for in the past many years!

It might be recalled that the very first payment released by the UNCC to the PCCCS was in late 1995 or early 1996 (?), for the 45 successful claimants of Category B (serious injuries or death). Actual date of release of payment by UNCC of the approved fund, in the total amount of US\$155,000, was not identified anywhere in UNCC's press releases posted on the web. As previously informed, fund release by UNCC was initially reported online on April 22, 1999. I found it strange that only once – on February 17, 2000 – was the Philippines included among the many countries paid by the UNCC.

With the PCCCS payment history generously shared to me last September 14, 2001, I discovered, to my amazement, that the UNCC remitted twice a year to the Philippines beginning in 1997! Under Category A claims which were divided into six installments by the UNCC, it was reported that remittances were

received within a period of two years commencing on March 12, 1997 and ending on October 28, 1999. Category C payments, on the other hand, were reported received by the PCCCS between October 8, 1997 and October 28, 1999, also within a period of two years. All the above belonged to the first batch of UNCC payments of compensation.

Second batch of payments, as noted, was initially remitted by UNCC on the same day – October 28, 1999 – that the first batch concluded. On that day, the PCCCS received US\$ 46,021,600.00, the highest single remittance ever received so far! Please take note that the over-all total of approved claims by Filipinos is US\$174.9 million!

My contention in my previous stories that compensation payments to the Philippines had been suspended by the UNCC ‘numerous’ times now seemed to be incorrect. I have come up to the original conclusion because of the gross delay of payments to rightful claimants. With the figures in hand, I observed that UNCC indeed regularly sent money to the PCCCS, but whether those were paid out promptly to the claimants was not very clear.

Of course, as experienced by the claimants themselves – my self included – there really was a gross and deliberate delay in payments of the compensation money. The PCCCS officials were obviously keeping the money in the bank for quite a long period of time! For interest earning, of course, because after all, as repeatedly claimed, the PCCCS was sanctioned by the UNCC to derive their operation expenses from the interest of the money as a whole – not from the individual claimant. As ruled by the UNCC, service fee equivalent to no more than 1.5% of the total claims amount, shall be borne by individual claimant.

An official report from the Commission on Audit (COA) released early this year has proven that the PCCCS officials have earned interest of over a million US dollars from its operation from May 1997 to March 31, 2000!

Alecks Pabico of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) who has been working hand-in-hand with me in the past year in exposing the Gulf War comp funds mess, when he sent the COA report, had this to say:

“i feel vindicated that my own report’s findings, as well as freda’s and what all of us have been suspecting all along, correspond to what the coa’s findings are. coa has also recommended a follow-up audit of the missing financial statements.”

Should I say more?

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## The fight continues, Part 3

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: June 30, 2002

OFFICIALS of the Philippine Claims and Compensation Committee Secretariat (PCCCS) will have something to explain regarding the report released by the Commission on Audit (COA) late last year. Said report stipulated that a total of US\$1,200,779.19 was earned, as income, from the interest of the compensation money remitted by the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) within a four-year period. Out of this interest earning only US\$239,565.24 was reported spent for operational expenses.

According to Mr. Alecks Pabico of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), the COA report was submitted to Vice President and Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) Secretary Teofisto Guingona in October 2001. It is not clear, as of this writing, if COA findings were verified and acted upon as per recommendation of the government audit team.

The special audit report, of which copy was obtained by PCIJ and generously shared by Mr. Pabico to this writer, covered transactions and operations of the PCCCS from March 1997 to March 31, 2000. March 2000 was the time that the scam involving then Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo was exposed for the first time by leading journalists based in Manila.

For clarity and information of all claimants and followers of this series on Gulf War compensation payments to Filipino victims, a summary of the COA report is hereunder presented:

### On accounting and reporting of funds

COA could not verify the financial transactions as well as balances of accountability of the funds received from UNCC because of lack of record. The PCCCS did not prepare and maintain financial records! Proofs of financial transactions presented by the PCCCS officials to the audit team comprised merely of bank statements and improvised claim vouchers with supporting documents for identification of claimants. There were no books of accounts to record the receipt and disbursement of funds!

Based on bank statements and the list of payees from May 1997 to March 31, 2000, total remittances from the UNCC amounted to US\$126,673,018.88. Disbursements from the fund totaled only to US\$39,316,146.95.

The most interesting part of the summary report provided by Mr. Pabico follows:

“Total interest income earned was US\$1,200,779.19, and only US\$239,565.24 was used to pay for operating expenses of the PCCCS.”

“However, veracity of the balances could not be made in the absence of financial records and supporting documents. A discrepancy in the balance of interest earned as reflected in the bank records was discovered, amounting to US\$63,929.74 as of March 16, 2000. The PCCCS says the difference represents amounts inadvertently not considered by the audit team. But the auditors counter that it was a result of the unavailability of the PCCCS’ disbursement records during the audit.”

Accordingly, PCCCS officials submitted a well-prepared schedule of payments but the amounts of disbursements could not be verified by the audit team as “there were no underlying documents to prove their validity.”

On internal control

There was obvious disarray within the PCCCS as far as internal control is concerned. COA noted that the system of recording of funds received from the UNCC and the subsequent disbursements to claimants and the service charges against interest earned “needs improvement.” Furthermore, it concluded that “the organizational structure of the PCCC Secretariat does not provide for an adequate check and balance in the functions of custody and record-keeping or accounting.”

Disbursements pertaining to PCCCS’ operations were “not covered by duly approved vouchers and other supporting documents, such as approved requisition and issue voucher (RIV), purchase order (PO), inspection and acceptance reports, thus making it difficult to determine the legality, propriety and validity of payments.” Requests for operating expenses and authorization, the COA discovered, were all done verbally.

The report noted that “all other disbursements for the operating expenses were paid in cash by the designated special disbursing officer regardless of amount upon presentation of official receipts, invoices, payroll and acknowledgement receipts.”

Payments of claimants’ money, as earlier mentioned, were supported by claim vouchers and the required supporting documents for identification purposes.

The audit team also discovered that compensation payments, in the form of a cheque, was signed only by Domingo. No countersignature was found anywhere in the copies of cheques given out to payees. Domingo also approved underlying documents such as notice of approval of claim, checklist and transmittal letter to the bank.

It is very interesting to note that at the time of the report “cash advances amounting to P96,044.60 granted to various officials (including former Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo) have not yet been liquidated.”

#### Procurement process

Disbursements made by PCCCS from December 24, 1999 to March 14, 2000, as reviewed by COA, showed “that purchases of various equipment amounting to P821,305.00 did not go through the regular and proper procurement process such as bidding of canvass from at least three bona fide dealers.”

It was also discovered the absence of documents such as requisition and issue vouchers and purchase orders to show that the equipment were acquired at the most advantageous prices.

#### Staff benefits

The COA report discovered “double-payment in the granting of benefits to the PCCC Secretariat personnel. Employees from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), Department of Justice (DOJ), Central Bank of the Philippines (CBP) and PIA assigned to the PCCCS office received 13th month pay, clothing allowance, cash gift, performance incentive pay even when they already received the same from their mother agencies.

COA, at the end of the report, has recommended a follow-up audit of the missing financial statements.

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## Heroes or slaves?

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: July 30, 2002

THE estimated 4.2 million Filipinos working abroad, time and again, have been tagged by the Philippine government as 'New Heroes'. This is so because of these workers' great contribution in the country's economy through dollar earnings remitted home to their families. The Philippines' gross national product (GNP), which is the broadest measure of economic output, has continuously gone up and sustained in the past few years, and economists all agree that the contributions of overseas Filipino workers play a great role in this respect. It has also been recorded that the OFWs saved the country from going down the drains, so to speak, in the recent economic turmoil experienced in Asian countries and elsewhere around the world. The OFWs' steady remittances had made the Philippine economy afloat!

Through the Philippine government's recognition and outright admission of its reliance on OFWs' dollar remittances, these so-called 'New Heroes of the Modern Philippines' have developed within themselves a new sense of honor and pride. They feel elated to be considered as one of the recognized players in the growth and sustenance of the Philippine economy.

Others may bask in the 'borrowed' glory of being termed heroes of the modern Philippines. But a few others, beginning to recognize that their toils abroad will come to nothingness in the end because of the Philippine government's failure to provide a concrete program for their eventual return to the country, think of themselves not as heroes but as slaves! Economic slaves, as some of these unsatisfied workers have termed the OFWs.

This new line of thought – just now emerging out of overseas Filipinos' frustrations in the government's 'playful' attitude – has actually evoked an added idea, that of 'New Freedom'. Freedom from the bondage of being treated as merely 'milking cows' by the government officials, especially those manning the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) and the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA). Freedom from unscrupulous employers and manning agency officials. Freedom from eventual feelings of despair and uselessness once retired from working overseas. Freedom from loneliness of staying long away from their loved ones. Freedom from recurrent dwindling of savings and resources. And the most important of all – freedom from poverty and neglect!

I would say that these OFWs should fight for their own freedom, a new freedom which will take them to an eventual atmosphere of economic stability. No longer dependent on their government but ON THEIR OWN.

A noble idea indeed and one which every OFW should consider and seriously think about.

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## **On to economic freedom**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

Published on: August 30, 2002

NEVER in their lives have the overseas Filipinos become active players in their own economic emancipation as now. The advent of the Internet has actually made it possible for many of them to come together to discuss ways to improve their lot, and to finally make a concrete move to realize their dream – that of establishing a bank which they can call their own.

What used to be just a dream is now coming into reality with the putting up of the Overseas Filipinos Worldwide International Holdings, Inc. (OFW Holdings) early this year. Some 200 staketakers or what is termed as charter founders risked their hard-earned dollars ranging from \$220 minimum to \$10,120 maximum from August 2001 until January 31, 2002. With their collective contributions, the OFW Holdings became a corporate body, officially registered at the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) on March 11, 2002.

Actually acting as the business arm of the Overseas Filipinos WorldNet Foundation, Inc. (OFWNet), the OFW Holdings serves as a vehicle for one of OFWNet's dual objectives of economic and political empowerment

for the millions of overseas Filipinos (OFs). In the political front, the OFWNet leads a campaign for the passage of the Absentee Voting (AV) bill still pending at the 12th Congress. Despite a promise of no less than President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the move to pass a law giving the inalienable right of suffrage to the OFs, members of both the lower and upper chambers of the Congress are still undecided as to whether enact the law or not.

Establishment of a bank



A universal bank, to be called OFW Bank (already the name is reserved at SEC, along with OFW Microfinance Bank), is aimed to be established by year 2006. A very ambitious move indeed but one which the original 200 staketakers were all bent in putting into action. Hand-in-hand, they strove to increase their base and are now numbering to nearly 400 – and are still steadily increasing.

With their sheer number – more than seven million of them overseas Filipinos – the proponents of the OFW Bank project are optimistic that they will reach their goal by 2006, and even earlier as foreseen by the newly elected chairman of the Board of Directors Gil R. Ramos. Dr. Ramos is actually considered the brain of this ambitious project and through his direction, by way of creating the OFW Community of Lists via the Internet early last year, the idea and then plans of establishing a bank, slowly but surely emerged in the horizon.

One of the subscribers of the OFW-Bank list during the early days of the discussions described well the rationale behind the project:

“We have the potential to be one of the biggest and strongest lobby blocks in the Philippines whose resources are not just financial but our physical number as well. We have seen how some big, “favored few” destroy an established institution in total disregard of the Filipino people’s pride and sentiments. It is high time that we harness our resources and tilt the balance in our favor and not just to be treated as a milking cow while those “favored few” are profiting from our hard earned dollars. Together we, the OFWs remit at least US\$ 7Billion to our home country, an amount praised to high heavens by politicians.

#### First 200 staketakers

Discussions among the hundreds of OFs in both the OFW-Bank and OFW-Business mailing lists (only two of the many under the OFW Community of Lists) finally led to the existence of a unique group, the so-called first 200 staketakers. These first 200 people will now go down in the history of the establishment of the OFW-owned bank as those who initially risked and fully gave out their trust to their leaders without any qualm, directed only by their burning ambition and the vision to prepare for their children’s future. As conceptualized by the Incubation Committee members, the following is the group’s guiding vision:

“Anak, kahapon ito’y pangarap lang. Ngayon ay nangyayari na. Bukas, naway kasaganaan at ginhawa ay makamtan. Mga anak, ito ang regalo ko sa inyo, ang inyong kinabukasan.” (My child, this used to be just a dream. Now it is happening. Tomorrow, may you only live in prosperity and comfort. My children, this is my gift to you, for your future.)

## Sprouting of businesses

As part of the incubation period or fund accumulation scheme, the OFW Holdings has lately engaged in various businesses. In June this year, it started operating the “Rent-a-Car” service alongside a Travel and Tours business entity. At the same time, the company also started giving out loans and other financing needs to its hundreds of stockholders.

This August, a partnership with Pioneer Allianz Life Insurance has been forged and the first four clients were immediately named less than a week of announcing the signing of Memorandum of Agreement and only after a day of releasing the implementing rules and regulations.

This October, preparations for the putting up of a small bank, a thrift bank or microfinance bank, will take off. According to Chief Operating Officer Norman Gacula, it will take a few months to one year before the small bank becomes operational. This OFW Microfinance Bank will be put up in one of the provinces outside Metropolitan Manila and is envisioned to branch out as the need arises.

A remittance service is also now under study and the OFW Holdings has recently partnered with Asia United Bank in order to actualize the business. Pilot area to initiate the project has been identified as Jeddah in Saudi Arabia and a special committee is now at work to study the project and is aiming for implementation before the year ends.

Other businesses which the OFW Holdings is planning to gradually engage with are all identified in a business plan painstakingly developed by Dr. Eduardo ‘Ka Edong’ del Rosario, the current Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the OFWNet, and Norman Gacula, also an elected official of OFWNet’s Board of Trustees. These businesses are as follows: freight forwarding, manpower services (land and sea-based), apartelle/hotel, travel agencies, agro-industrial projects, health and medicare services, schools and training centers, technology transfer projects, marketing and product distribution, franchising and media companies. All these businesses will ultimately take the visionaries to its goal which is the establishment of the OFW Bank in 2006.

## An open invitation

Quoted below, in parts, is an open invitation to join the OFW Bank project, as taken from the OFWNet website, to wit:

“Our Fellow Overseas Filipinos,

Bank ownership for Overseas Filipinos is now rising in the horizon. Imagine yourself where you are part owner availing of the services of the bank in remittances, loans, investments, and other financial services. Imagine the benefits this would bring to our families and the economy as well. How is this possible and how can we do this?

As a major contributor to the economy of the Philippines which is widely accepted by the past and present government administration we have not seen any considerable economic development and growth in our society. We are calling on all the entrepreneurial and all our kababayan Overseas Filipinos whose burning desire to act as catalyst to a sustainable economic endeavor to benefit not just the OF community but the nation’s economy as well. Join us in our effort to once again flex our collective muscle in a private sector effort in the formation of a Bank that would be owned mostly by OFs to service our sectors banking needs. You can explore the on-going process and be part of a historic pioneering effort by subscribing to the OFW Bank e-mail list.

You can either send a blank email to [OFW-Bank-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:OFW-Bank-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) or go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/OFW-Bank/j...>

The establishment of the ‘bank’ is at the centerpiece of the Overseas Filipinos effort for economic empowerment. Join us today and be part of the historic pioneering effort in our quest for economic emancipation. Your individual participation would help us strengthen our collective effort in our quest for economic emancipation in an organization that will change the way we do business for the better. Let us do our share towards economic empowerment of OFWs.”

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## **Overseas Filipinos fight for their right to vote**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

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A WORLDWIDE campaign and clamor to allow overseas Filipinos to vote in the Philippine national elections in May 2004, initially, is now actively taking place. In particular, campaigners are seeking for the passage of the Absentee Voting Bill (AVB) pending in the past many years in the Congress. Along with the AVB, overseas Filipinos are also seeking for the passage of the Dual Citizenship law.

This year saw the most active and widely-participated campaign, so far, by overseas Filipinos for their right to suffrage. Assisting and working along with them are a few concerned Philippine-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private individuals. While in the past many years the clamor to vote was concentrated only in Europe, it is now worldwide, made possible through the Internet. Through their coordinated effort, the Philippine government took considerable notice and for the first time since the 1987-amended Constitution provided for the inalienable right to suffrage to overseas Filipinos, a Philippine President, in the person of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, deemed it urgent that the Congress pass the AVB. In her State of the Nation Address (SONA), both last year and this year, President Arroyo asked the Congress to pass a law which will enable the overseas Filipinos to vote.

#### Senate consultations

Early this year, selected members of the Senate, held consultations in areas abound with Filipinos – in Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, Europe and America – aimed at coming up with a comprehensive and practical provisions for the actualization of overseas voting. The group of Senators then was one in assuring the overseas Filipinos that the AVB will be passed into law no later than June 2002. The Speaker of the House even announced that he will resign from his post if the AV law won't be passed by June. [Later he was heard saying "before the end of the year."] As it came out, the bill is still pending as at this writing. Yes, it was passed alright by the opposition Senators during a "coup" session held last June 5, 2002, but the act was later negated with the mere fact that it was hastily and 'unlawfully' done.

By early March the International Coalition for Overseas Filipinos' Voting Rights (ICOFVR) came into being, thought of by Manila supporters to act as an umbrella coalition that all interested groups could come under. The idea was then introduced on a mailing list, the OFW-Vote, owned and administered by the Overseas Filipinos WorldNet Foundation, Inc. (OFWNet). Soon enough, the most active Saudi Arabia-based Filipinos adopted the name and was used to unify their group during a one-day dialogue and consultation held between the visiting Senate members and the Filipino Community in Riyadh last March 2002. By June 2002, the ICOFVR expressed its solidarity move through a one-page paid advertisement in the widely-read Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) newspaper. Filipinos overseas, as well as in the Philippines, contributed from their pockets and within 48 hours were able to accomplish one unprecedented move and showmanship of unity. The act indeed showed that the overseas Filipinos are a force to reckon with!

#### OFW 'Congress'

Also in June, a counterpart government dubbed as 'OFW Congress' was initiated by the OFWNet to add meat to the fight. Overseas Filipinos and their representatives acted as 'senators' and 'congressmen' and took part in interpellations over the controversial AVB, in the presence of a few Philippine Congress

personalities. Although attended by very few OFs and supporters, the activity nevertheless played a significant role in the campaign to have that AVB passed into law. It specifically exposed some congressmen's apprehensions and hesitations and most significantly their ignorance of the overseas Filipinos' situation abroad and their stand in the fight for the right to suffrage. For a while one Congressman who acted as spokesperson was attacked and ridiculed via the Internet by some members of the worldwide AV advocacy group.

Another act to show concern for the Congress' inability to pass an enabling law for AV has been the attendance in all the sessions held at the Batasang Pambansa (National Assembly) Hall religiously covered by representatives of Kakammpi or Kapisanan ng mga Kamag-anak ng Migranteng Manggagawang Pilipino (organization of relatives of Filipino migrant workers), eLagda Inc (that group which initiated the worldwide signature campaign to oust President Joseph Estrada in late 2000), the OFWNet Foundation and a few concerned individuals. Notable among the spectators is Ellen Sana of Kakammpi who also attended in the past special sessions held by the Senate Committee on Suffrage and likewise timely reported to the advocacy group via the OFW-Vote mailing list. She had been relentless and is recognized as the most active among the fighters. It was reported that during the last session of the Congress in September, she was brought to tears by her frustrations over the failure of the lawmakers to approve the AVB as promised.

In order to sustain the campaign after the Congress' failure to pass the AV law this past session, the voting advocacy members started with their letter-writing campaign. Individual campaigners were requested to send letters to editors of a few leading newspapers in Manila. Showing coordination and ability to participate as requested, a number of overseas Filipinos diligently wrote, as assigned for the day, to certain newspaper editor or columnists. One letter, written by ex-OFW Rhoel Mendoza got to be published. As well, a number of letter-writers were mentioned by one columnist when he did a summary of all the letters he received. As spearheaded by Saudi-based Filipinos, letters were also sent to their respective Congressmen/women through its 'Tutukan si Congressman' (Eye the Congressman) campaign, asking for their support to pass the AV law. A few letters got answered and subsequently shared via the OFW-Vote mailing list and other related egroups. Letters were also sent to Senators.

#### Campaigners of the AVB

Noteworthy is the OFW Net's active role as one of the front liners in the fight, ably represented by Dr. Eduardo 'Ka Edong' del Rosario (chairman of the Board of Trustees), Dra. Rachele 'Chee' Garcia (managing director, also an elected BOT official) and Cathy Ledesma (political division head). Based in Manila, the OFWNet advocates both political and economic empowerment of overseas Filipinos. Noel Esquela and Jun Aguilar of Filipino Migrants Workers based in Manila are also names which come to fore insofar as AVB campaign is concerned.

US-based EMPOWER's Marvin Bionat, who initiated the call for voluntary contribution for the full-page PDI advertisement, is also worth mentioning. He very recently coined the unified statement for the final 'stand and act' to have the AVB passed this October session of the Congress. For the full text, please refer to this link: <http://www.philippineupdate.com>. The Europe-based Platform of Filipino Migrant Organisations in Europe, recognized as the initiator of the campaign for the passage of the AVB, is of course one group deserving merit for the efforts done in the overseas voting advocacy front. It may be recalled that it organized 'Advocacy Visits' to the Philippines in August 1998, August 2000 and August 2001 to express concern on the Congress' inability to enact an AV law. (For related story, please refer to On Overseas' Filipinos right to vote). Names which come to mind are Ding Bagasao, Leila "Lalay" Rispens-Noel, Grace Cabactulan, Basco Fernandez, Beth de Groot and Carlo Butalid.

The Federation of Philippine-American Chamber of Commerce (FPACC) has also made its dent in the AV advocacy by way of initiating a signature campaign through its 'Filipino World Alliance for Dual Citizenship and Absentee Vote' project. Signatures collected were handed over to the Congress last June by Ms. Yolanda Stern, the current FPACC president. Another group, the Association of Ilonggos of Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Inc. represented by its president, Pearl Garganera-Gauzon, Esq. is also an active participant in the worldwide campaign. A latest addition is Joe Garrido-led Ilocanos4AV, an organization of Ilocanos in California, USA. Other names notable as fighters for the passage of the AVB in the US are Robert Ceralvo, Cesar Torres, Gil Ramos, Ren Arrieta, Nat Duenas, Gerry Azusa, Perry Diaz and Jess Guim.

In Canada, one recognized fighter is Ms. Terry Olayta of the United Filipino Mothers Association (UFMA) of Toronto. As private individual fighters, both Winda 'Moonglow' Lagumbay Pettila and Robert 'Bob' Gabuna are notable. In Japan, the names Yuko Takei and Antonina 'Ka Tonyang' Binsol surface and despite the cold treatment of Filipinos there on the subject, they managed to gather a few thousands signatures for the worldwide campaign. In Singapore, the most vocal advocator is Ofellia Mananquil-Bakker, known as 'Tita O' to the subscribers of the OFW Community of Lists of which OFW-Vote is subbed. Daphne Ceniza-Kouk of eLagda Hong Kong is another person identified with the AVB campaign. With ease, she can travel back to Manila whenever her presence is needed, just as in one of the advocacy group's strategies of getting the support of Philippine press and media people.

Perhaps the most extensive and well-organized of all overseas groups in the fight for the right to vote, active members-wise, that is, is the ICOFVR-Saudi Arabia chapter. The group members, composed of strong-willed leaders such as Alfredo Ganapin, Mike Bolos, Rashid Fabricante, Tony Ranque, Isagani Manalo, Manny Lector and many more (prominent names too many to mention) have lately handed over to the Congress over three thousand signatures for the AV campaign. In a very strong statement, the signatories advocate, among others, 'economic' boycott which calls, if necessary, for stoppage of remittance to the Philippines should the AV law not passed this year. The statement also calls for an action of 'No vote' by their family members and friends for those Congress personalities who are unsupportive of their cause. In order to solidify the fight and other OFWs' concerns, the Saudi group has

lately formed an alliance composed of different organizational heads from the three recognized regions: central (Riyadh), western (Jeddah) and eastern (Al-Khobar).

#### Current stand

The overseas Filipinos and their partners in the Philippines have tried all means to lobby for the passage of the Absentee Voting law yet their pleas were again set aside by the Congress during its last session in August/September. It is now about to open this first week of October. Tireless and unrelented, the worldwide voting advocacy members are now making a stand. Should the AVB not passed into law, the following actions and measures will be done (as copied from the EMPOWER site):

1. NOW we ask ALL our families in the Philippines to show sympathy to our just cause: ACTIVELY SUPPORT politicians who push for immediate passage, and BLACKLIST AND BOOT OUT OF OFFICE those who directly or passively oppose absentee voting! We will provide a complete list of our political allies, as well as those who are blocking passage, and marshal all our resources to either ELECT THEM or KICK THEM OUT of office! For the most recalcitrant politicians, we will not wait until the next elections: We will partner with our allies in the mainstream Philippine media and use the tools of modern communications, including the Internet, to EXPOSE them for their anti-migrant politics!

2. NOW we appeal to members of the international community—including human rights organizations, aid agencies, foreign governments, and transnational businesses with conscience—to exert all their moral, political, and economic sway in our fight for a basic human right: PLEASE JOIN US IN URGING the Manila administration to finally demonstrate the political will to enfranchise overseas Filipinos! We are now launching a letter-writing campaign to expose the immoral political apartheid that has kept 7 to 8 million overseas Filipinos voiceless.

3. NOW we ask ALL overseas Filipinos and foreign nationals to make a hard but powerful choice to show solidarity in our now epic struggle for political inclusion: IF BY THE END OF OCTOBER THE ABSENTEE VOTING BILL IS STILL ROTTING ON THE CONGRESSIONAL SHELF, LET US SUSPEND UNNECESSARY VISITS to the Philippines UNTIL absentee voting becomes law! As much as we like to be home, we will dramatize the gravity of Congress's colossal failure by staying away from a country whose government has continued to treat 7 to 8 million of its citizens as political outcasts.

4. NOW we call upon ALL overseas Filipinos who value their right of suffrage to use our ultimate economic leverage to bring the absentee voting issue to the fore: USE OUR REMITTANCE AS A WEAPON to urge Congress to get its act together!

·This is NOT a call to completely stop sending funds to our families back home. We cannot punish our families for the failure of politicians. It is a campaign to encourage overseas Filipinos to REMIT FUNDS OUTSIDE THE RADAR SCREEN of government until the administration realizes that we mean business. Currently, around 70 percent of all remittances go through banks, which are monitored and taxed by the government. Our contribution to the country's foreign exchange reserves has been enormous. To prevent the government from laying its claim to our hard-earned dollars, we encourage ALL overseas Filipinos to send funds through non-bank channels, preferably through colleagues, friends, family, or private agencies. For gifts, we encourage ALL overseas Filipinos to send balikbayan boxes instead of cash.

·If our families have money deposited in banks in the Philippines, we encourage them to utilize those funds, as we make deposits in our banks abroad for their use AFTER passage. It is a temporary arrangement that will send a clear message to an administration that has so far paid lip service to our fight for political empowerment.

·IF BY THE END OF OCTOBER THE ABSENTEE VOTING BILL IS STILL LANGUISHING IN THE LEGISLATURE, WE WILL DESIGNATE A SPECIFIC PERIOD AT WHICH TIME WE WILL COMPLETELY REFRAIN FROM REMITTING FUNDS. WE ASK ALL OVERSEAS FILIPINOS TO BE PREPARED FOR THIS EVENTUALITY!

JUSTICE DELAYED IS JUSTICE DENIED!

IT'S TIME WE MAKE MEMBERS OF CONGRESS DO THEIR SWORN DUTY TO ALLOW THE 7 TO 8 MILLION OVERSEAS FILIPINOS TO EXERCISE THEIR INALIENABLE RIGHT TO VOTE!

LET US ALL TAKE A STAND! LET US ALL ACT TO PASS THE ABSENTEE VOTING BILL BY END OF OCTOBER!

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## **One Messy OWWA**

Author: Freda Editha O. Contreras

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OWWA stands for Overseas Workers Welfare Administration. It is one special government body under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) which collects, among its various functions, US\$25 from each overseas Filipino worker (OFW) leaving the country either to work for the first time abroad or as a returnee. Originally, as a rule, this US\$25 was being paid for the OFW by his/her prospective



employer at initial employment. Some employers paid and others didn't. After a while it was offered as a voluntary contribution to OFWs interested in getting back something should accident or the inevitable happen to them. Then a few years back, the US\$25 became mandatory and no OFW is allowed to leave the country without paying it!

Understandably, OWWA's life depends on this US\$25 contribution – be it paid for the first time by individual employer or otherwise. It uses the fund for its many welfare functions, so to speak, as well as its administrative duties. But what happens when the fund is used indiscriminately and outside its original purpose? A mess, it will be, of course, and that's where OWWA is in right now!

Mid-May this year, DOLE Secretary Patricia Sto. Tomas was first reported exposing the mess in OWWA to the public. She said that OWWA lost some P1.2-B in fund as a result of bad investments entered into by then Administrator Wilhelm Soriano. Santo Tomas also revealed that OWWA's administrative expenses in the past year far exceeded that of welfare assistance being given to OFWs. While welfare assistance pegged 22% only, administrative costs reached a high 77%, she said.

As investigation into the mess escalated, Soriano went on leave and was later replaced, in early November by Virgilio Angelo, previously of the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO). Soriano, according to Labor Secretary Santo Tomas, could be held liable in court for investing the OFWs' money without approval of the OWWA Board of Trustees of which she sits as chairperson. Investigation is still going on . . .

Meanwhile, disgruntled OFWs could no longer contain their anger as to OWWA's mishandling of their hard-earned contribution. The OWWA contribution entitles each OFW with welfare benefits, loan packages and scholarship programs for their children. The OFWs are now in the process of signing a Petition entitled "A Call to Action for OWWA Transparency and Restructuring" started on the Internet via the OFW Community of Lists. Spearheaded by Alfredo Ganapin of eLagda-Riyadh, he likewise collects and collates signatures, which as of his last report dated December 23, 2002, has now reached over a thousand signatories.

In order to get a better understanding of what the OFWs are clamoring for, I find it fit to include here below the full text of their 'Call to Action':

#### A CALL TO ACTION FOR OWWA TRANSPARENCY and RESTRUCTURING

WE, the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and our supporters, demand that the Overseas Workers and Welfare Administration (OWWA) submit itself to a full public management and accounting audit without delay, not only for collections and expenditures for year 2001 but also for previous years.

While millions of pesos continue to be collected from vacationing OFWs and first-timers, six (6) months have already passed and reports on the alleged misuse of funds have remained unresolved and services in areas of deployment are affected. A preliminary report on this has already been submitted by the Secretary of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) on May 23, 2002 to the Presidential Anti-Graft Commission but we have yet to hear of any results. Senate and House Resolutions have also been introduced to look into the OWWA fund utilization but these have yet to be followed up.

We strongly believe that the restructuring of OWWA fund management and utilization towards improvement of services and greater OFW and civil society representation should be considered as urgent legislative agenda. The issue of whether the \$25 OWWA membership fee is mandatory or voluntary and whether it is a trust fund or not should also be addressed.

We also urge our legislators to transcend political affiliations and loyalties and pursue with diligence and commitment the Senate and House Resolutions on the OWWA fund.\*

The controversial investments, going as far back as 1983 with the P200-million advanced to Landoil Resources (majority owned by Speaker Jose de Venecia) and Greater Manila Land Corporation, were done without the approval of the board of trustees. More recently, in 1995, some P500 million in investments were made to the Smokey Mountain Reclamation and Development Project (SMRDP) certificates. Accumulated interest and principal of these investments reportedly remain uncollected to this date.

Considering the huge amounts involved in the Landoil and SMRDP investments, we find former Administrators Wilhelm Soriano and David Corpin's decisions without the board's approval, while invoking Memorandum of Instruction 008 issued in 1986 to cover such actions, as the height of imprudence.

Then OWWA Administrator Wilhelm Soriano said that he has the "binding authority as to where to invest the OWWA Fund, including how and how much." <http://www.inq7.net/nwsbrk/2002/jun/10/n...> But the same article pointed out that "the lack of due diligence in evaluating investments is glaring. The superficial evaluation conducted by OWWA's Acquired Assets and Investments Unit for the SMRDP investment was not an isolated case...the P500 million invested in SMRDP constituted a whopping 45 percent of the OWWA's capital funds at the time, something that would have raised eyebrows among professional fund managers."

The DOLE Committee report argued that the Presidential Decrees 1694 and 1809 are “the clear mandate that financial transactions as far as the workers money is concerned, were subject to the rules and regulations of the Board of Trustees.” PD 1809, issued in 1981, provides that all “transactions in the Welfund (workers welfare fund) shall be subject to such rules and regulations as may be formulated by its Board of Trustees.”

The report also said that the “MOI 008, issued by Administrator Salvador Bigay, mentions that the Capital Fund shall be administered and controlled through the Office of the Administrator. Even this MOI however does not deviate from what the PDs require as the administration and control is only through, and not by, the Office of the Administrator, and the investment shall still be within the guidelines set by the management.” <http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2002...>

“As authorized under PD 1809 which amended PD 1694, the OWWA board, as a matter of policy, requires that Soriano should utilize not more than 50 percent of the agency’s investment income of the previous year provided that a forced savings equivalent to 20 percent is imposed. On programs budget, the law has a restrictive provision where Soriano is not allowed to use more than 60 percent of the funds from the workers’ contribution and membership fees. Who allowed him to utilize up to 134 percent of the funds for operations could hardly be accuser Sto. Tomas. What makes Malacañang hesitant to open up the big can of worms is a valid administrative question the Labor chief should pursue.” <http://www.tribune.net.ph/20020520/comme...>

A study of OWWA’s expenses also shows its lopsided priorities. “From 1998 to 2001, OWWA’s expenses averaged 86 percent of its total income for the previous year. In 1998 and 2002, expenses actually exceeded the previous year’s income. The 2001 figures show P636, 588,140 in expenditures. Of this total, only P143,596,722, or 22.5 percent, was spent on benefits for OWWA contributors. The balance went to operating expenses, mostly salaries. Of the proposed P883 million budget for 2002, only P287 million, or 32.5 percent, will go to benefits, while the balance will be used for operations.” <http://www.inq7.net/nwsbrk/2002/jun/10/n...>

Also, during a campaign by the United Filipinos in Hong Kong in 1996, they presented a pie chart which showed that only 11% of the \$25 membership fee actually goes to direct benefits for OFWs such as insurance claims, burial assistance, disability, welfare assistance, etc., while the rest of the amount goes to the overseas allowances of OWWA and DOLE in various countries, service delivery costs, rentals of office space, etc. [From OWWA Pie Chart, United Filipinos (UNIFIL) in Hong Kong; and the Migrant’s Focus Magazine: Issue #2 “A Feast in Government Fees”; provided by the Asia Pacific Mission for Migrant Filipinos]

In the light of the aforementioned, we therefore demand the following:

1. Immediately implement the US\$25 as voluntary OWWA membership fee.

The original vision that the OWWA contribution must come from employers, as supposedly mandated by law, is already lost, especially for the Balik Manggagawa or returning Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) with renewed contracts. Although there are agencies that make sure that this fee is shouldered by employers and will not be deducted from the workers, this is usually only true for new OFWs. Compliance is difficult, if not totally non-existent, from employers of returning OFWs.

2. Resume the investigations on the alleged OWWA fund mess, specifically on the investments made in Landoil and SMRDP, and perform a full public management and accounting audit. If it has nothing to hide from the past, then OWWA should submit itself to a full and unhampered investigation. Appropriate administrative sanctions or charges should be placed on officials who erred.

3. Expose those who may wish to obstruct any investigation and charge them appropriately in courts.

4. Release the official audited reports on OWWA fund collections and expenditures for 2001 and previous years and publish these in an official website.

5. Restructure the OWWA and study how the welfare fund could be transformed for better services to members.

6. Review the OWWA administrative guidelines and provide a reasonable and specific cap on expenditures. Increase funding for direct benefits to members, which may come in the form of a provident fund.

7. Evaluate the history and functions of the different agencies that are involved in the welfare and protection of OFWs and determine if they are really responsive to the needs of the Filipino workers.

8. Craft laws that will provide greater OFW and civil society representation in policy-making bodies related to OFW concerns. In particular, establish clear, democratic and transparent criteria for the selection of the OWWA board and administrator, with more OFW representation in the board.

We have not forgotten the OFWs and their families who have benefited from OWWA assistance, such as for accidents and burials, but any assistance that OWWA has rendered in the past or any of its achievements should not be used to gloss over any irregularities in rendering of other services or the misuse of the funds.

We appeal to our kababayan who are employed in OWWA to understand our demands as not a personal attack on their livelihood and future but a necessary step to improve the services to OFW members, especially those who are in distress, and to protect from misuse the resources that we have contributed for OWWA's existence in the first place.

We look forward to the new OWWA Administrator Virgilio Angelo to rise to the challenge of addressing the above-mentioned demands.

We also urge the government to review its mandate as expressed in Article V, Section 8 of the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act of 1995 (RA8042), that "All fees for services being charged by any government office on migrant workers as of June 7, 1995 shall not be increased. All other services rendered by the DOLE and other government agencies in connection with the recruitment, introduction and placement of any assistance to migrant workers shall be rendered free."

The paramount role of the state is to ensure protection and the well being of its citizens, wherever they are.

We are calling on all concerned kababayan, egroups, NGOs, government officials and legislators to act together for the welfare of all OFWs around the world.

THE TIME TO ACT TOGETHER IS NOW!

\* Senate Resolutions:

Senate Resolution No. 59, introduced by Senator Ramon MAGSAYSAY JR., 23 July 2001, entitled: "RESOLUTION URGING THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND EMPLOYMENT, THE CONGRESSIONAL COMMISSION ON LABOR AND OTHER APPROPRIATE COMMITTEE/S TO CONDUCT AN INQUIRY, IN AID OF LEGISLATION, ANENT THE BUDGET UTILIZATION OF THE OVERSEAS WORKERS' WELFARE ADMINISTRATION (OWWA) IN THE LIGHT OF THE NUMEROUS COMPLAINTS LODGED BY OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS CITING OWWA'S LACK OF NECESSARY ASSISTANCE AND SLOW MOVING DELIVERY OF

SERVICES WITH THE END IN VIEW OF FORMULATING REMEDIAL MEASURES TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES" [http://www.senate.gov.ph/bills\\_res/ibmon...](http://www.senate.gov.ph/bills_res/ibmon...)

Senate Resolution No. 314, introduced by Senator Aquilino Q. Pimentel Jr., entitled: "A RESOLUTION DIRECTING THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR TO CONDUCT AN INVESTIGATION IN AID OF LEGISLATION REGARDING THE REPORTED MISUSE OF OWWA FUNDS" <http://www.nenepimentel.org/bills/PSR-31...>

Senate Resolution No. 330, introduced by Senator Edgardo ANGARA, 17 September 2002 "...seeks the creation of a Senate ad hoc committee on government trust funds. The resolution states that the government trust funds, specially the reported mismanagement of OWWA's multi-billion-peso trust fund, should be looked into so that reforms in the handling and management of the funds can be put in place." [http://www.silangan-shimbun.jp/Sept\\_upda...](http://www.silangan-shimbun.jp/Sept_upda...) <http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2002...>

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