

DATELINE PHILIPPINES

GMA returns with 121 OFWs

by RUDY SANTOS
Philstar.com

MANILA – President Arroyo arrived home from a three-nation tour on September 24 with some 121 distressed overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who were stranded in Saudi Arabia.

Pres. Arroyo brought the OFWs back with her after representations from the Saudi Arabian government to repatriate the distressed Filipino workers.

The Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration (OWWA) finalized the arrangements for the immediate repatriation of the stranded workers during the President's visit to Saudi Arabia.

Pres. Arroyo tasked Labor Secretary Marianito Roque to expedite the processing of travel documents of the stranded Filipino workers.

Roque said the Philippine Overseas Labor Office (POLO) staff in Riyadh is also working to expedite the exit documentation of the remaining stranded workers who have camped out under Jeddah's Kandara bridge.

Earlier, 97 of these workers were brought home.

OWWA administrator Carmelita Dimzon said OWWA has been advancing plane fares and paying the penalties of the stranded workers for immigration and breach of contract violations.

Dimzon said the Saudi government would allow migrant workers to leave only if they can show an exit permit from their employers.

"OWWA is quick when it comes to bringing our workers home, to spare them from further distress. Our OWWA welfare officers can get the plane bookings fast but what slows down repatriation is the non-cooperation of some employers to sign no-objection clearances needed to issue their exit visas," Dimzon said.

Dimzon stressed the agency does not distinguish between OWWA members and non-members when it comes to extending airport assistance services, facilitation of immigration clearances, and providing temporary accommodation and domestic transportation, legal assistance and reintegration services to

Filipino migrant workers.

President Arroyo expressed her concern over the plight of Filipino workers stranded in other countries, notwithstanding the travel ban on high-risk countries such as Iraq, Jordan and Afghanistan.

Aside from safety risks, some Filipino workers still try their

luck in getting employment in the three countries amid reports of underpayment of wages, alleged maltreatment and exploitation of many household service workers.

Regarding the reported increase in the number of run-arounds in the Middle East, Dim-

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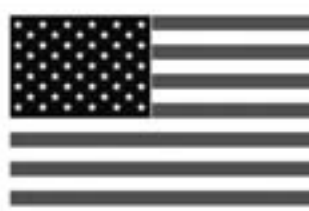
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