

Pope says Filipino people need upright leaders

by EVELYN MACAIRAN
Philstar.com

MANILA – Believing that poverty continues to be a major concern in the Philippines, Pope Benedict XVI On October 7 advised Filipinos to choose upright political leaders.

The Pope gave the message to Philippine Ambassador to the Vatican Mercedes Arrasitia Tuason during a meeting last Oct. 2.

In CBCPNews, the official news service provider of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), the meeting between the Pope and Tuason revealed the concern of the Holy See of the continuing struggle of Filipinos in the face of the two powerful storms that devastated the country in a week.

Tuason said the Pope suggested that Filipinos should choose leaders who would lead them out of the struggle.

"The struggle against poverty

in the Philippines calls for honesty, integrity and an unwavering fidelity to the principles of justice, especially on the part of those entrusted with positions of governance and public administration," the Pope said.

The Pope also said that Filipino public officials should rediscover the real ethical foundation of their political authority.

The Pontiff called on officials to work for peace, particularly in Mindanao, described as a region "scarred by conflicts."

In his statement, the Pope did not make any reference to a specific group but only said that the people should work for charity and persevere in the peace-building efforts in Southern Philippines.

"In an age when the name of God is abused by certain groups, the work of charity is particularly urgent," the Pontiff added.

The Pope also praised the "courageous steps" being taken in the Philippines "to foster

reconciliation and mutual understanding."

He cited in particular the "commendable work" of the Bishops-Ulama Conference, the Mindanao People's Conference, and the many grassroots organizations.

Tuason was among three new ambassadors to the Holy See that presented their Letters of Credence to the Pope at his summer residence in Rome.

The two others were Henriette Johanna Cornelia Maria van Lynden-Leijten of the Netherlands, and Miguel Humberto Diaz of the United States.

The Pope often uses the reception of a new ambassador as a venue to send a message to their government expressing his concerns or appreciation about certain matters.

Over the years, the Pope has been briefed about the situation in the country by Filipino bishops as well as by the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Vatican to the Philippines. ■



MARKET DAY. People wade in flood water to buy goods at an indoor public market Wednesday, Oct. 7 in Pasig City. Aid workers assisted take advantage of improving weather to help flood victims and drop food supplies in areas recovering from the devastating flood.

AP Photo by Pat Roque

AMONG 300 DISTRESSED FROM MALDIVES

40 ailing OFWs return home

FORTY distressed overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) arrived in the Philippines penniless and with high fever and various ailments from the island paradise of Maldives where they were forced to drink dirty water sullied by cockroaches and mosquito larvae.

The migrant workers from Vilingili, Maamhendoo, and Dhaandhoo Islands in Gaafu Alif Atoll returned to the country on Oct. 2 at 2pm via flight MH 704, sponsored by the Maldivian government. They were among 300 OFWs who failed to get their salaries aside from enduring squalid living conditions.

Villar's office, which was contacted by the OFWs, fetched them at the airport in Manila and provided them immediate medical assistance and a late lunch, while affording them transportation fares for their trips back to their hometowns in Apayao, Isabela, Kalinga, Cagayan, Pangasinan, Bulacan, La Union, Bicol, Metro Manila, and Negros Occidental.

"Not only must they be given immediate and adequate medical attention, but our OFWs must also get their due wages and compensation for damages," Villar said, while emphasizing that the remaining beleaguered OFWs in Maldives should be promptly repatriated.

The migrant workers were employed as construction workers by a firm which promised them salaries ranging from US\$400 to US\$500 and decent accommodation. In Maldives, however, they were made to engage in hard manual labor without adequate food, causing gastritis and fatigue. They were also made to sleep in flea-ridden beds, which led to insomnia and skin ailments.

Danny Catalon, like the 39 others who came home, left the Philippines to uplift his family's life. His dream turned into a living nightmare in Maldives where he and his other fellow OFWs had to live through distressing conditions.

"Ang bawat araw sa Maldives ay bangungot. Pinabayaan kami ng aming employer. Wala nang

sweldo, wala pang pagkain. Kung mayroon man ay nilalangaw naman. Umaasa rin kami sa ulan para makainom kung saan dumadaan ito sa filtration doon na may kiti-kiti, ipis at bulok na dahon," recounted Catalon who returned to his family in Marikina City.

The OFWs, assisted by Migrante International, are set to file a case on Oct. 15 against their employer and agency for contract substitution and other abuses.

Among the OFWs who returned are: Abraham Sanchez, Joel Miguel, Elbert Mercado, Joel Rivo, Edwin Rullan, Adonis Mingaracal, Chito Cairas, William Ginez, Saturnino Repato, Mario Adriano Jr., Edchel Ariate, John Mar Javier, Louie Nabor, Albino Bernabe Jr., Ruben Rosario, Michael Tubo, Edmar Persona, Dionicio Antalan, John Paul Doctolero, Jeffren Amboy, Joy Ladera, Sandy Lumanog, Divo Turqueza, Jomar Bilgera, Jefe Juralbal, Rommel Viernes, Jervie Louie Banot, Julimar Pabro, Zaldy Acumabig, William Nicolas, and Valero Cabarubias.

Harsh conditions faced by OFWs has prompted Villar to actively press for the application of the "no-fault insurance" for OFWs, a form of indemnity plan in which anyone injured in an accident or misfortune receives direct payment from the company that has insured them, eliminating the need for victims to establish another's liability or fault through a civil case.

Villar has set up helpline Sagip OFW for distressed migrant workers to give them an avenue to air their plight for timely assistance, while battling for conducive economic conditions to expand opportunities in the country as a long-term solution.

Maldives, famous for its pristine islands and clear waters, is a country that stretches south of India's Lakshadweep islands, southwest of Sri Lanka. It is the smallest Asian country in terms of both population and area, and predominantly Muslim. (Office of Sen. Manny Villar press release)



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