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Clamor continues for aid to Filipino workers in Middle East

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NCR Today

MANILA, Philippines -- The Philippines government needs to bring home Filipino workers caught in violent conflicts in the Middle East, said Fr. Anton Pascual, Caritas Manila's director, Monday.

"We challenge the Department of Labor and Employment and the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration to intensify their efforts to save OFWs [overseas Filipino workers] caught in conflicts in Middle East countries," Pascual said over Philippine Church radio.

Those government bodies need to prepare to repatriate numerous overseas workers, who have been contributing not only to their own families' income, but also to the nation's coffers, said Pascual, who also serves as president of Veritas 846 Radyo.

Pascual joined the call for government action after the death of 23-year-old Meran Montezor, who was killed Feb. 24 when gangs in Homs, Syria, shot at the vehicle she was riding in with her employers.

Relatives told a Bandila television news reporter Montezor had asked to return to the Philippines soon after violence in Syria broke out, but her employers disapproved because her contract had not yet ended.

Her boyfriend showed the reporter a text message she had sent him saying her agency refused to help repatriate her because the Philippine Embassy had no funds.

Montezor is the second reported Filipino to have died in the Middle East. Another female worker died Feb. 22 of renal failure while waiting for her flight back to the Philippines.

Syrian public demonstrations demanding the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad, the disbanding of his administration and an end to almost five decades of Ba'ath Party rule began Jan. 26, 2011.

The uprising, which spread nationwide, is part of the wave of upheavals in the Arab world called the Arab Spring. Syria's government sent out its army to quell protests.

The Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs raised the alert level for Syria in August, prompting the Philippines Overseas Employment Administration to ban sending new hires and allowing former overseas workers to return to the country.

Mandatory repatriation of all Filipinos in the country was ordered after the Department of Foreign Affairs raised crisis alert in Syria to level 4 on Dec. 22.

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A government team was sent to Syria to work on putting Filipinos on planes back to the Philippines from the troubled areas of Homs, Hama, Idlib and Daraa.

A 2009 survey found about 1.1 million land-based Filipino workers overseas, with 64 percent of those in the Middle East, Pascual said.

In his Monday address delivered in Filipino, the Caritas director asked, "How many more lives of OFW need to be put at stake?"

He praised the workers' "great contribution to our economy" and urged the government to return the contribution by attending to the workers' safety and wellbeing.

In 2011, overseas workers sent home about \$20 billion, 7.2 percent higher than 2010, according to Central Bank data.

Pascual said the best reward government can give overseas workers, especially those in the Middle East, is the promise of someday being able to return to some "decent work" in the Philippines.

"The capacity of a society to take care of the common good and to secure the people's future can be measured by the jobs it can provide," Pascual said, citing church social teaching.

He pointed to lack of jobs and resulting high numbers of unemployed people as "proof that our country has failed us." This drives millions of Filipinos to struggle abroad, he said.

According to the social teachings of the church, it is government's responsibility to take care of and ensure the good of a nation's workers, the primary force of an economy, Pascual added.

Susan Ople, head of the Blas F. Ople Policy Center and Training Institute, a non-governmental organization for migration and labor concerns, also called on government to do all that it can to repatriate Filipino workers and to probe reports of human trafficking in the Middle East.

Vice President Jejomar Binay, Presidential Adviser on OFW Concerns and former chairman of Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking, said 31 out of 37 overseas workers he brought back to the Philippines on March 12 were victims of human trafficking.

The Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person or persons ... by means of threat or use of force, or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or position ... for the purpose of exploitation such as sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery."

On Tuesday, the foreign affairs department announced the Syrian government excluded Filipinos from the list of foreign nationals allowed to work in Syria through a Syrian Ministry of Interior decision order dated March 4.

Another batch of nine workers, all women, are expected to arrive back in the country Thursday, including Alma Bella Guiao, who last year helped bring at least 25 overseas workers to the Philippine Embassy in Damascus from Homs and Latakia.

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