

Our First Priority: The Safety of Our Workers

Over the past two decades, over half a million Filipino workers in the Middle East have been sending billions of dollars to our troubled economy. Today, their lives are in danger. It is our responsibility to see to it that they are safely repatriated and their families at home assisted.

Sixty thousand Filipinos are presently trapped in Kuwait following the annexation of that country by Iraq. All border crossings from Kuwait to the neighboring Saudi Arabia have been sealed off by the 130,000 occupying Iraqi troops. In spite of this, 476 Filipino workers managed to escape on their own. The fate of other Filipinos trapped in Kuwait is unknown, except for the three thousand who have reportedly sought refuge at the Philippine embassy there.

Three hundred and fifty thousand more Filipino workers are nervous about the possible extension of the war to the eastern border of Saudi Arabia near Dammam and Dharan, where most of them are concentrated.

Analysts have commented on the likely effect of this war upon the supply and price of oil. They have also calculated the probable impact upon the Philippine economy of the sudden halt in the remittance of dollar earnings by our workers in the Middle East. These are all important concerns.

But BISIG contends that the most important concern of our government at present should be the immediate security and orderly repatriation of our beleaguered workers. There has never been, so far, any government pronouncement on how this may be undertaken. Estimates of the number of workers actually involved have remained estimates. Neither the Department of Labor nor the Department of Foreign Affairs has issued any report about the exact location and number of Filipinos directly affected.

Much less have we read of any plan that indicates how many ships or airplanes might be necessary to transport the Filipinos from Kuwait alone. There are reports that Philippine authorities are negotiating with Iraqi officials for the safe passage of Filipinos in Iraq through Jordan. How concrete and sustained are these negotiations? At what levels are they taking place?

There appears to be no independent monitoring either of the situation as it unfolds on a day-to-day basis. Most of the Filipino ambassadors in these countries, notably in Kuwait, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, were found not to be at their posts when the war broke out.

Meanwhile, the US has rushed troops, aircraft carriers and warplanes to Saudi Arabia. Not content with the UN imposition of economic sanctions, its boats and those of other Western

powers have formed a blockade to prevent Iraq from shipping out its oil. All these can only be preparatory to a bombardment of Iraq to teach them a lesson.

The Philippines must unequivocally criticize the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, but it must also dissociate itself from the warmongering of the US. The US has no moral warrant to punish Iraq. Its own arrogant invasion of Grenada, and more recently, of Panama, disqualifies it from playing the role of enforcer of international norms.

The cause of peace is better served by the judicious diplomacy of the community of Arab nations. The Philippines must support such initiatives as the Arab Summit held recently in Cairo. It may show its opposition to an American solution by objecting to the deployment of US forces from American bases in the Philippines.

Though the Cairo summit of 20 Arab nations has so far failed to produce a consensus, this should not provide the justification for an American solution to the crisis. Throughout history, the Arab peoples have struggled to free themselves from Western colonialism. Periodic crises in these countries have often become the occasion for entrenching US military and economic interests in the region.

The current crisis is no exception. The Philippines must encourage an autonomous solution to the Iraq-Kuwait problem.

To summarize, we call upon the Aquino government to:

1. Assure the safety of all Filipino workers;
2. Provide their families urgent economic assistance;
3. Criticize Iraq's use of war as an instrument of national policy;
4. Support Pan-Arab initiatives to restore peace in the Middle East through autonomous diplomacy;
5. Denounce US warmongering and military intervention in the Middle East; and
6. Oppose the use of US bases in the Philippines as sources of war personnel, supplies, and materials for the Gulf war.

BISIG

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