



THE Migrant Watch

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Manila, Philippines

Last minute rush for absentee voter registration

by Noel L. Josue
Kaibigan

On the final day of registration for absentee voting (September 30, 2003), thousands trooped to embassies and consulates and registrants are now between 300,000 - 350,000, a big jump from the 219,000 four days before the deadline.

The low turnout can be attributable to many things. First, the law itself is very stringent. The law requires absentee voters to personally register and personally vote. A lot of our Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) are situated far from embassies and consulates. Many are not even allowed by their employers to have their day off. It will be too costly for every OFW to go to these embassies and consulates.

The provision requiring absentee voters to execute an affidavit that he/she will return to the Philippines to establish residence within three years after the May 2004 elections is very burdensome for overseas Filipinos. Many opted not to register as this will prejudice their immigration status in the host country.

The registration period of two months is very short compared to the original plan of Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to conduct the registration of absentee voters for at least six months. The absentee voting law was passed only last February 2003 and funds for the exercise just reached COMELEC in May 2003.

The information campaign for registration also has limitations because of the small budget granted to COMELEC and Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). The different NGO groups conducted independent information dissemination campaigns on a "sariling sikap" basis without financial support from government and minimal moral support from COMELEC. Sad to say, COMELEC even blamed NGO groups for the low turnout, which is without basis, sweeping, unjust and uncalled for.

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) position calling for a simplified procedure of registration and voting by mail instead of personal registration and voting is worth noting.

The original position of NGO groups, that a combination of personal and via mail registration and voting should be implemented without limiting the registration and voting by mail to three countries, also deserves some attention.

Though the number of absentee voter registrants is a far cry from the potential voter estimate of 1.72 million, for starters, this is still a good number that can influence the May 2004 elections. Multiply that number to three voters for families left behind by these registered absentee voters, the number of collective votes of OFWs will soar to between 900,000 to 1.05 million.

The present crop of absentee voters and their families can still influence who will become the president of the Republic of the Philippines for the next six years after May 2004, the 12 Senators and the Party List Representatives in Congress.



OAV Registration: an initial assessment

SOME FIGURES

The two-month Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) registration period ended on September 30, 2003. According to the OAV Secretariat of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA OAVS) the partial unofficial tally of OAV registration turnout, as of October 7, 2003 was 360,581. This is 37% of the 900,000 official OAV registration projection based on the actual provisions of the OAV Law.

From this figure, 155,384 (43%) came from the Middle East and Africa, 154,719 (43%) from the Asia Pacific region, 37,522 (10%) from Europe and 12,956 (4%) from the Americas.

OAV Registration Facilities consisted of eighty one embassies and consulates, 3 MECO offices (Taipei, Taichung, Kaoshiung), 5 satellite registration centers (Dubai, Al Khobar, Macau, Central Hongkong and Rotterdam) and 154 field or mobile registration centers under 44 posts.

WHY THE LOW TURNOUT?

According to DFA OAVS, from the total estimate of 7.5 million overseas Filipinos, 30% of whom are minors, former Filipinos and immigrants, only 1.76M qualify as potential OAV registrants. The 975,000 target was arrived at after consideration of the actual provisions of the law plus some realities on the ground which included the following:

- that the workers in the domestic service sector have limited days off and mobility;
- that OFWs in specific countries may have difficulties in complying with personal registration requirements (i.e. Saudi Arabia, Hongkong, United Arab Emirates, Japan, Taiwan, Kuwait, Sabah, Italy)
- that only 30% of the OFWs reside or work within 160 kilometers from the Posts.

WHAT THE OFWS AND ADVOCATES SAY

On October 8, the Center for Migrant Advocacy Philippines (CMA-Phils) in cooperation with the DFA OAVS and the Consortium for Electoral Reforms (CER) organized a public forum to conduct an initial assessment of the OAV Registration from the perspective of the overseas Filipinos and the advocates. Initial assessment points from Hongkong,

Japan, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, Ireland and Europe-wide as well as feedbacks from Boston, New York and New Jersey and Saipan from the US were presented. The reports were contributions from the network of the International Coalition for the Overseas Filipinos Voting Rights (ICOFVR). The government was ably represented by Ms. Catherine Paredes-Maceda and Ms. Pat Rodolfo, vice chair and staff respectively of the DFA OAVS. The reports were one in attributing the following for the low turnout in the OAV registration:

- Delayed passage of the law, RA9189. It was passed only on February 13, 2003, three months behind the latest target date of November 2002, as requested by Comelec;
- Delayed official promulgation of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) due to a case filed with the Supreme Court questioning the authority of the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee (JCOC) to approve the IRR; decision on the case was handed down only on July 10, 2003;
- Shortened period of OAV registration from three months to only two months due to delays in the release of the budget and the Supreme Court decision;
- Lack of sufficient and timely information on OAV coming from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC)
- Sheer lack of faith, trust and confidence in the Philippine political and electoral system;
- Flaws in the law, RA9189 (requirement for personal registration, personal voting, affidavit of intent to return for immigrants and permanent residents among others);
- Delayed decisions to set up mobile or field registration centers in many countries and destinations and the lack of information about them.

The seafarers' sector likewise expressed strong sentiments on the lack of consultation with them. They felt that the present OAV law was crafted only for land-based overseas Filipinos. And until certain provisions and mechanisms are put in place in consideration of the peculiar situation of sea-based Filipinos, the law will remain ineffective and disenfranchising.

Overall, the overseas Filipinos strongly feel that both the Philippine legislators and the Comelec simply failed to appreciate and consider the actual situations and particularities on the ground.

WHAT IS NEXT?

Proceeding from the learnings of the two-month registration period, the urgent task now in the lead up to the 2004 elections is to identify problem areas that may be addressed through executive and administrative corrective measures to ensure better performance in the implementation and actual conduct of voting, counting and canvassing so we can have credible election results.

For succeeding elections, however, the OAV law must be amended accordingly to make it truly enfranchising for the most number of overseas Filipinos.

THE Migrant Watch

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Ellene Sana
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OFWs' welfare suffers due to OWWA's brouhaha

By Edmund H. Ruga - ECMI

Working overseas is presently considered as one of the leading options for employment among the ranks of the Filipino workforce. At present there is an estimated 7.53 million Filipinos overseas scattered in 197 countries worldwide, of which 3.15 million or 42% are documented contract workers.

We have heard so many stories and sacrifices of these Filipino workers abroad, from the encouraging to the more depressing. One of their major concerns is the current state of social and welfare protection they could depend on while working overseas and upon their return for good in the Philippines.

Many agencies, both private and government, are offering services on social and welfare protection to answer the needs of various sectors of society. The Philippine government has created agencies that would serve this purpose, particularly the Social Security System (SSS), serving the needs of the private sector, and the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS), covering the government sector. However, both of these agencies are presently facing controversies. For the overseas workers' sector, the lead government agency mandated by law to protect the welfare and interest of OFWs is the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA), an attached agency of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

The fund of OWWA is a trust fund coming from two different contributions of every registered OFW. The first is the membership contribution amounting to Php 1200.00 paid per contract basis for a maximum of two years that covers insurance and other welfare packages. The second is the Medicare contri-

bution amounting to Php 900.00 paid every year that covers health and medical benefits. Family members declared as beneficiaries are also covered by the programs. These contributions coming from hundreds of thousands of Filipinos leaving for overseas work every year actually add up to a big amount of money. But that is not the issue for OFWs and their families. They are not that interested in how big the OWWA fund is, but what they are more concerned with is how this fund is being utilized to deliver actual welfare services intended for them and their families.

This uncertainty regarding the use of OWWA funds was reinforced when recently, the OWWA management made a "coldhearted decision" suspending the livelihood loan assistance program in December 2002, and phasing-out the general financial assistance program on July 1, 2003 - programs that would potentially benefit the OFW returnees.

The OWWA is being managed by a Board of Trustees (BOT) composed of twelve (12) members, seven (7) from the government and five (5) from the private sector, which decides on policy directions for its programs and services. The Secretary of the DOLE acts as the chair and the OWWA Administrator as the vice-chair.

OWWA has suspended the livelihood loan program pending a review of its implementation since its regional centers have failed to meet the targeted 70% repayment rate. Such reason is unacceptable to those members in need of additional capital for businesses where some of them get their daily subsistence.

The phasing-out of the general financial assistance program is another suffering to those OFWs who have already re-



turned to the Philippines for good. Under this program, they would have been entitled to burial and medical assistance. But now, these are no longer available. When they were still working abroad, these OFWs were hailed as modern day heroes, but once they retire from overseas work, they immediately become forgotten heroes. For now, the OFWs who are actively working abroad and regularly paying their contributions to OWWA, have to wait for the completion of OWWA's review for the chance to avail of the livelihood loan under a much better program, as promised.

Meanwhile, the OFW returnees who shared their contributions with OWWA for so long also have to wait for further developments on the issue of whether they

would still be considered beneficiaries of OWWA or not. But until when do they have to wait?

The migrants' advocates, particularly the Philippine Migrants Rights Watch (PMRW), have already bared its position on this issue. Proper representation to concerned government authorities has already been done. They promised! And it is already two months now but PMRW has yet to hear any good news regarding the issue. Until when shall we wait?

The OFWs (active and inactive) including their families should be given the right protection and welfare due them. Let's not forget what Pope John Paul II said, "the migrant is to be considered not merely as an instrument of production but as a subject endowed with full human dignity".

Coup d'etat, too much politics and mudslinging

EDITORIAL

Noel L. Josue *Kaibigan*

Barely a year into the May 2004 elections the political season has started this early. The "Jose Pidal" issue against the Arroyo administration has plunged the nation into shameless mudslinging perpetrated by the "Mr. Clean" yet sinister schemes of Kuratong Baleleng-rub-out-king-turned-senator Panfilo "Ping" Lacson.

The Incredible Hulk Part I, II, III, etc... have the ingredients of popular tell-tale telenovelas - power play, sex and violence, and intrigues. It's a real box office hit. The political climate is more interesting if show biz flavor is added in the cooking pot. The masa feasted on

the controversy invoking quotable quotes reminiscent of the Erap impeachment trial - invoking one's "right to privacy", "I can't remember your honor", "clowns in the senate", "Mahusay flip-flop".

Ping Lacson seems to imitate the powerpoint presentation of Joker Arroyo during the ERAP impeachment, hoping that the *masa* will sympathize and do another EDSA revolt. But how can he gain public sympathy when

his past is tainted as well with alleged dubious records of "rub-out", "drug dealing", "money laundering", etc. His credibility as "Mr. Expose" is zero in the public eye. He can pass though as "Mr. Suave" - a mild mannered yet dangerous presidential aspirant. If he will become president, many in non-government organizations will migrate to foreign lands or join the rebels in the hinterlands as he is perceived as a fascist and militarist policeman who may be capable of implementing warrant-less arrest, torture and political vendetta. The gory image of a burnt Bubby Dacer, the Joey de Leon Red Scorpion Scorpion killings, etc. are still hanging questions haunting the *masa*.

The First Gentleman vs. Ping Lacson controversy was preceded by the July 27 Oakwood failed coup d'etat in which around 300

soldiers brandishing modern and high powered weapons, including C4 explosives held a so-called "gripe session" against the Arroyo Administration.

These two incidents have tainted the political as well as economic stability of our fledgling democracy. The popularity rating of Pres. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has plunged into an all time low though right after the Oakwood incident; the peaceful resolution of the crisis has positively increased her approval ratings.

One thing is clear though: the economy has suffered very badly. The dollar exchange rate became unstable as the peso depreciated

steeply at US\$1.00 - P55.00. The prices of gasoline and prime commodities skyrocketed, triggering inflation and widespread double-digit unemployment.

In this kind of situation, who will again save our economy?

Of course, the ever reliable OFWs will save the day for the Philippine economy. The US\$8 billion annual remittance of OFWs has kept the economy afloat since the '70s and into the 21st century.

Even without government prodding, every OFW abroad has demonstrated his/her patriotic duty of sending dollar remittances to his/her loved ones. The mega mall and food chain economy has flourished because around 7 million OFW families have patronized these establishments.

The dollar exchange rate will stabilize at tolerable levels once again because the volume of OFW remittances during the last quarter of the year is expected to be generally high.

The enormous savings, investments and purchasing power of OFW families have enabled local manufacturing and small and medium scale enterprises to sustain their operations. In fact OFWs are now called OFIs or overseas Filipino investors.

The government has all the reasons to be grateful to OFWs.



Advocates champion OPAs' rights in DAWN-CHR Conference

by Jannis Montañes

Development Action for Women Network (DAWN)

From pre-departure, on-site, to reintegration, there prevails vulnerability and disempowerment of Filipina entertainers in Japan or what the government calls, the "Overseas Performing Artists" (OPAs). In pursuit of its continuing advocacy against all forms of human rights violations against women migrants, the Development Action for Women Network (DAWN) made a big step towards unveiling more realities behind this alarming scenario. And this was reaffirmed by groups and individuals who believe that it's about time for this old problem to be addressed.

DAWN, together with the Commission on Human Rights and through the support of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, organized the "Conference on Overseas Performing Artists in Japan: Addressing a Range of Issues from Pre-departure to Reintegration" last September 17, 2003 at the Manila Pavilion Hotel.

Highlight of the conference was the executive summary report of the research conducted by DAWN. DAWN's Executive Director Carmelita Nuqui presented the findings gathered by the research team through various research methodologies: survey and focus group discussions with 120 OPA respondents (OPA first timers, old timers and returnees); interview with officials of the different government agencies and industry leaders; and the on-site visit to Japan. Video clips from DAWN's visit to Japan with the "The Correspondents", a public affairs program of ABS-CBN, was also shown. The video presentation was lifted from the episode aired by the same program last April.

The report noted the interrelated legal, social and economic issues which illustrate the vulnerability and disempowerment of Filipino women OPAs during the migration process, from pre-departure, to on-site, to their return and



reintegration. Numerous human rights violations committed against the OPAs based on local and international instruments and government policies were cited in the report. Most of the OPAs who participated in the study were also found to have been impelled and changed by the need to survive. The report cited eleven recommendations for immediate action by the sectors involved from both the Philippine and Japanese governments.

Human rights advocates from the government, private sector and civil society groups gathered for this event led by the Vice President of the Republic of the Philippines, Teofisto Guingona, who emphasized the need to eradicate abuses and degradation of human rights of migrants in his inspirational talk.

Issues confronting overseas performing artists (OPAs) were also presented through musical numbers by the Teatro Akebono members of DAWN – the Japanese-Filipino children (JFC) and the women migrants.

Another significant report of the afternoon program was the presentation of responses by the representatives from both countries. Japan's Senator Masako Owaki and Professor Kinhide Mushakoji of HURIGHTS Osaka and the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimina-

tion and Racism (IMADR) shared their insights and views on the issues of OPAs. Coming from the different sectors of the Philippine society were Representative Roseller Barinaga, Chair of the House Committee on Labor and Employment, Dean Merlin Magallona of the University of the Philippines' International Legal Studies, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Director Marianito Roque and former OPA and now DAWN's Sikhay coordinator, Mary Joy Barcelona.

Other representatives from various groups also engaged in an interesting discussion during the open forum.

The participants reaffirmed what were presented in the report. The situation of the OPAs was described to be alarming and in need of a solution. Both the Philippine and Japanese governments were noted to have weak points in protecting OPAs' rights, beginning with the determination, commitment and political will of the leaders to address the issues. Dollar contributions of OPAs through remittances was cited as an important factor behind the Philippine government's continuous deployment of OPAs to Japan despite the prevailing problems. Government policies and program for departing and returning OPAs and those at the

work site were noted, in one way or another, as insufficient and/or ineffective in protecting OPAs' rights, both the implementation and monitoring. Filipino women were also noted to be not empowered with information about their rights as migrants and as women in Japan.

The Japanese government, on the other hand, was described as "an underdeveloped country in terms of human rights protection." In fact, it has yet to have its own Human Rights Commission that will perform the functions of an independent body to protect human rights, including those of foreign workers. NGOs are said to be more active in providing assistance to OPA victims of abuse and domestic violence. In the issue of rampant trafficking in Japan, its National Police Agency is said to have taken steps to better address the problem. However, Japan has yet to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families which could lead to protective measures for its foreign workers like the OPAs.

The conference ended with the commitment rendered by both DAWN and CHR to ensure the strict implementation and monitoring of the recommendations made for the protection of the rights of OPAs and their families.

FROM OWWA MEDICARE TO PHILHEALTH

A synopsis of services plus some gray areas

by Leo Bobila

Scalabrini Center for People on the Move (SCPM)

The talk of the town for quite sometime now among the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and various NGOs working for migrants' concerns is the proposed transfer of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) Medicare funds to the Philippine Health Insurance, Inc. (PHIC). Malacañang issued the Executive Order 182 on February 14, 2003 effecting the transfer. The E.O. based itself on R.A. 7875, which mandated the establishment of a National Health Insurance Program thereby instituting the PHIC in 1995. On June 16, 2003, a joint revised version of EO 182 was forwarded to Malacañang by the Acting Secretary of DOLE, Manuel G. Imson and the President and CEO of PhilHealth, Francisco T. Duque III.

Neither the Executive Order nor its revised version was ever published in the official gazette or any newspaper of general circulation because of protests and demands for further study and clarifications by concerned NGOs.

The following tables¹ comparing the OWWA Medicare and the PHIC Program can provide some light to the readers on the matter for a better and more informed choice.

Table 1: Medicare benefits

Room and Board Not exceeding 45 days for each member & another 45 days to be shared b his dependents						
	PHIC			OWWA		
	HOSPITAL CATEGORY			HOSPITAL CATEGORY		
	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
Ordinary/intensive	200	300	400	200	300	400
Catastrophic	200	300	400	360	660	1,035
Drugs and Medicine Per single period of confinement						
Ordinary	1,500	1,700	3,000	1,500	1,700	3,000
Intensive	2,500	4,000	9,000	2,500	4,000	9,000
Catastrophic	0	8,000	16,000	0	19,725	35,655
X-ray, Laboratory etc. Per single period of confinement						
Ordinary	350	850	1,700	350	850	1,700
Intensive	700	2,000	4,000	700	2,000	4,000
Catastrophic	0	4,000	14,000	0	10,215	29,430
Professional Fee Per single period of confinement P 150/da for General Practitioner P 250/da for Specialist but shall not exceed:						
a. Ordinary Gen Prac Specialist	600 1,000	600 1,000	600 1,000	600 1,000	600 1,000	600 1,000
b. Intensive Gen Prac Specialist	900 1,500	900 1,500	900 1,500	900 1,500	900 1,500	900 1,500
c. Catastrophic Gen Prac Specialist	900 1,500	900 1,500	900 2,500	315 per day not to exceed 2,430 450 per day not to exceed 4,050		
Operating Room Fee Per single period of confinement						
RUV 30 & Below	RUV 385	670	1,060	385	670	1,060
31 to 80	0	1,140	1,350	0	1,140	1,350
RUV 81 & above	0	2,160	3,490	0	pls. see below	pls. see below
RUV 81 to 200	-	-	-	-	2,160	3,490
RVU 201 & above	-	-	-	-	6,480	10,470
catastrophic case	-	-	-	-	-	-
RVU 80 & Below	-	-	-	1,155	2,010	3,180
RVU81 to 200	-	-	-	0	3,420	4,050
Surgical Family Planning Hospital and professional fee charges ¹						
Vasectomy	Hospital and professional fee charges computed			900	900	900
Tubal ligation	at 15 RVU			1,125	1,125	1,125
Out Patient Benefit Package						
PHIC				OWWA		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Reimbursement in Chemotherapy, Radiotherapy, Cataract Extraction, Hemodialysis, Day surgery Services in the Rural Health Units (RHUs) which include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Primary consultation with Physicians, Laboratory services such as Urinalysis, Chest X-ray, CBC, Sputum Microscopy, and Personal preventive services that include Visual acetic screening for Cervical cancer, digital rectal exam, periodic clinical breast examination, lifestyle modification counseling 				<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Free Check-up Free Routine Laboratory Exams and Medicines 		

Table 2: a comparison of PHIC Medicare & OWWA Medicare

In a letter sent by the PMRW to Mr. Duque on August 22, 2003, the group reiterated that there shall be no diminution of benefits to all the member-beneficiaries of the OWWA Medicare; that the current benefit package currently enjoyed under OWWA shall be retained; the P900 premium per annum be maintained; the supplemental benefit package to cover, among others, catastrophic cases must be provided for and be identified in detail. Also, other entitlements under PHIC, in a progressive scheme, may be fully availed of by members and beneficiaries upon reaching the age of 60 when they shall be granted with life-time non-paying membership status. It is also suggested that a retroactive scheme for OWWA Medicare member-beneficiaries be made beginning 1995 and that an OFW representative be given a seat in the PhilHealth Board.

There are still many gray areas, however, to be carefully considered. The PHIC will retain the P900 per annum premium for the next 3 years after

	PHIC MEDICARE	OWWA MEDICARE
MANDATE	RA 7875 mandating compulsory coverage of ALL Filipinos in the National Health Insurance Program (NHIP)	Executive Order 195 which mandates implementation of a Medical Care for FOCWs and dependents
MEMBERSHIP COVERAGE	Employed Members and dependents Self-employed/OFW Members and dependents Qualified Indigents and dependents Qualified Retirees/Pensioners and dependents	FOCWs and dependents
BENEFIT ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS	IPMs IFOCWs - confinement within the effectivity date of coverage - confinement in an Accredited Health Care Institution - 45 day allowance for room and board has not been consumed	- Confinement in a PHIC accredited hospital - Payment of the annual Medicare contribution - the confinement date is within the period of effectivity of coverage as appearing in the member's Medicare Eligibility Certificate (MEC) - the 45-day room and board allowance for the calendar year has not been exhausted
PREMIUM RATES	OWWA Members/FOCWs - Fixed at 900/year	Fixed at 900 per annum
CONTRIBUTION REQUIREMENT	Payment of three (3) regular monthly premiums within the immediate six (6) months prior to the month of confinement, i.e., a waiting period of 3 months upon payment is observed prior to availment of benefits	Payment of the annual Medicare premium contribution. Effectivity of availment shall start on the day after the payment is made until expiry
BENEFITS A. IN-PATIENT HOSPITAL CARE	- Room and Board - Services of Accredited Health Care Professional - Diagnostic, laboratory and other medical examination services - Use of surgical or medical equipment facilities - Prescription Drugs and biologicals - In-patient education package - Reimbursement abroad	- Room and Board - Services of Accredited Health Care Professional - Diagnostic, laboratory and other examination services - Use of surgical or medical equipment facilities - Prescription Drugs and biologicals - Reimbursement abroad
B. OUT-PATIENT CARE	- Chemotherapy - Radiotherapy - Cataract Extraction - Hemodialysis - Minor surgical procedures done in an operating room complex For Indigent Members - Capitation of P300 in sites abroad provided for RHU for each family	- Free Check-up - Free Routine Laboratory Exams and Medicines not exceeding P500.00 per family per MEC coverage - Free health education & counseling selected clinics and hospitals nationwide & 7 sites abroad
C. INCREASE IN BENEFITS	10%-15% increase in benefits for catastrophic cases	200% increase in benefits for catastrophic cases (in-patient care)
D. LIFETIME COVERAGE	Free coverage of member and dependents of members who have reached 60 and has contributed 120 monthly Medicare contributions	Coverage based on effectivity of annual payments
CLAIMS PROCESSING	- Processing of good claims takes an average of forty five (45) to sixty (60) days - Prescriptive period on filing of claims for local and foreign confinements abroad is fixed at sixty (60) and 180 days respectively	- Processing of good claims takes an average of thirty (30) to forty five (45) days - Prescriptive period for application for direct reimbursement of hospital benefits of members and dependents abroad is extended up to six (6) months
OTHERS	- Payment of premiums of FOCWS abroad can be made by their dependents	- Members can RENEW their membership abroad -The OWWA through its overseas post provides response to queries from members at jobsites

which it shall make some adjustments. What criteria would be used in evaluating the OFW and non-OFW members? Will it be the Philippine salary standard or the foreign standard of salary where the OFW is based? How can the discrepancies be bridged? Another gray area is the amount of money to be transferred. The current proposed scheme is to turn over to PHIC only the amount actuarially needed to fund the basic OFW Medicare Program for a period of 1 year and the rest of the funds will remain under OWWA to serve as the OFW supplemental benefit package. Will this scheme not defeat the very purpose of the transfer and the intent of R.A. 7875 in the first place?

Aside from these gray areas mentioned above, there could still be others. Hence a time for further study and various consultations concerning the various options and schemes is needed to ensure the optimum benefit for the OFWs and their beneficiaries.

¹ PHIC, *Transfer of the Health Insurance Fund and Medicare Functions from OWWA to PHIC: A Discussion Paper*, pp. 6-7.

APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA - MANILA

The Apostleship of the Sea (AOS) is an Apostolate of the Catholic Church for Seafarers with an international network of more than 300 "Stella Maris" Centers and pastoral bases in as many ports in the world under the leadership of the Pontifical Council for Seafarers in Rome.

The life of seafarers is risky, lonely and difficult, exposing them to problems related to work adjustment onboard, personal well-being, family relations, cultural and religious dislocation.

AOS offers them friendly assistance regardless of their nationality, race, color, custom and religious affiliation.

AOS interacts with all government and international organizations, private agencies and maritime institutions in a constant work of advocacy and protection on behalf of seafarers. AOS in the Philippines also reaches out to seafarers' families and maritime students with programs of counseling, information and value formation.

AOS in the Philippines is present in 8 major ports: Manila, Cebu, Davao, Iligan, Cagayan de Oro, Maasin, Iloilo and San Fernando (LU).

Services:

- Ship Visitation (daily)
- Hospital Visitation (several times a week)
- Religious services on board (upon request)
- Publications
- Transportation
- Legal Assistance
- Lobbying
- Seminars in Maritime Colleges
- Pre-departure Seminars
- Seafarers' Family Apostolate
- Christian Leadership Formation
- Special seafarers' events organization

The motto of the AOS is: "There are no strangers here! Only people we have not yet met".



Fr. Savino Bernardi, cs

Apostleship of the Sea - Manila

THE Migrant Watch

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