

Stricter border controls, repatriations expected

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DÉJÀ VU describes the financial meltdown's impact on migrant workers.

Repatriation, more border controls, punitive penalties for undocumented migrant workers, and no new or higher levels of employment in host countries will be the same this year as has happened in the Asian financial crisis of 1997, according to Dr. Maruja Asis, Scalabrini Migration Center director.

The director, cited by the OFW Journalism Consortium, also expects more overseas migration but also increased undocumented overseas workers as well as rising numbers of returning migrant workers—as in 1997.

International labor migration “hasn't adversely affected” the Philippines, owing to increasing deployment to old and new labor markets, and because of rising remittances, the OFW Journalism Consortium quoted Stella Go, De La Salle University professor and migration expert.

What worries her, however, is that the crisis might increase the risks facing Filipino workers abroad in “vulnerable occupations” such as domestic help and construction, she said. “They might be exposed to wage cuts and less-ideal work conditions.”

Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Korea are among the target destination countries for Filipino migrant workers.

Figures of deployed migrant workers in 2007 from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) show that these four countries received 76,565 newly hired and rehired Filipino workers, according to the OFW Journalism Consortium, a group of journalists concerned about overseas Filipino workers.

Demand for foreign labor

While Singapore, Southeast Asia's financial hub, will experience a “sharp economic downturn that is the most severe in the country's history,” it will still need foreign workers, the consortium quoted Dr. Yap Mui Teng of the Lee Kwan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.

Singapore companies forecast a minus 5-percent gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate for this year, he said, adding it was unavoidable that companies would cut costs and fire foreign workers first and nationals last. GDP, a key economic indicator, is the final cost of all goods and services produced in a country in a year.

Teng said that more foreign workers were complaining of unclaimed salaries and of being subjected to “no work, no pay” situations. He added that some manpower agencies could place repatriated foreign workers.

He said analysts forecast that 50,000 foreign workers would lose their jobs this year, especially those in manufacturing and construction.

About 143,000 highly skilled foreign workers in Singapore hold employment passes while 757,000 semi-skilled foreign workers (including domestic workers) hold work permits.

Feeling the pinch

Neighboring Malaysia is also feeling the pinch as migrant workers will be among the 400,000 workers that employers' federations forecast to be laid off this year.

The situation is especially glaring for Malaysia's manufacturing sector, whose biggest market is recession-hit United States.

The government has responded with a policy seen as harsh for migrant workers. In retrenchments, they will be terminated first. Plus, a freeze hiring of migrant workers was put in place, and the deportation of undocumented migrants was fast-tracked.

A bright spot is that the crisis may possibly see the government regularizing some of the undocumented workers in Malaysia's informal sector. But since migrant workers hold annual work permits, it is easy for employers to retrench them.

Thailand and South Korea

Thailand, which supplies and hosts migrant workers, is unlikely to extend the work permits of some 200,000 documented migrant workers in 2010.

Thais would be hired first, the OFW Journalism Consortium quoted Dr. Supang Chantavanich of the Asian Research Center on Migration based in Chulalongkorn University as saying.

If foreign workers wish to extend their work permits, "they have to apply through Thai line government agencies," she added.

Thailand has 76,206 foreign construction workers and 53,933 foreign domestic workers.

Chantavanich expects the increased hiring of construction and domestic workers in the two sectors where migrant workers will not be affected by the crisis "due to increasing needs for them."

It is no better in South Korea where the global economic crisis has led to the retrenching of some 6,707 foreign workers last year.

Retrenchments because of bankruptcy and shutting down of small- and medium-sized enterprises have also affected migrant workers.

The South Korean government has suspended issuing work visas to foreign workers until 2010 because of a "shrinking labor market," said economist Park Young Bum of Hansung University, according to the OFW Journalism Consortium.

South Korea also subsidizes small and medium enterprises that replace foreign workers with Koreans.

Since 2008, it sent back home some 8,000 undocumented migrant workers but Park thinks the country depends on unskilled foreign labor and a massive repatriation "is not possible."