Sojourn to the South: A Story on the Filipino Migrant Deportees

Wednesday 1 March 2006, by CARUMBA Amabella L. (Date first published: 2005).

It was August when the news of massive deportation of Filipino migrants from Malaysia broke out. In the past months, the arrival of these Overseas Filipino Workers from the said country came in trickles that it was barely noticed. But then reports of the mass exodus and the shocking news of the maltreatment they suffered during detention in Malaysian jails stunned the Philippine nation. The maltreatment, according to Filipinos, coming from the Malaysian authorities didn’t only happen during the mass deportation but it has been happening in the past every time Filipinos were caught without the necessary documents to legalize their stay in Malaysia. It was only this time when the maltreatment and abuses suffered by the Filipinos migrants were experienced in masse that their plight took the limelight in Philippine news and yes, the international media, too. The Philippine government was so careful in handling the news in fear of breaching its diplomatic relations with the Malaysian government.

In the midst of the furor caused by the massive crackdown on Filipino migrants and their mass deportation to the Philippines, a group of NGOs in Mindanao came together and formed themselves into a Consortium of NGOs to delve into the real issue/s behind the mass deportation in Malaysia and the emerging trend of mass deportation of migrant workers, not only in that country, but also in other countries such as Iraq, France, Italy and Japan. Surely, there’s something more to this than what meets the eye..Out of that gathering the Consortium decided to send a three-person advance to the deportation sites to have a feel of the area and to take the pulse of the government agencies concerned , the local groups present in the area and the religious groups.

Thus, we set out for our long journey to begin in Zamboanga City. The Team was composed of two males and a female. One of the two men was a Maguindanaon, one of the 13 tribes of the Moros (Muslims) while the other one was a mestizo Tausug, another Moro tribe. I completed the team, a female majority settler (Christian). As Joseph and I came from the same office, Sumpay-Mindanao, Inc., we started our journey earlier from our base, Iligan City, going to Cotabato City for our briefing and orientation. There we met Anwar, the third person of the Team from Sumpay’s network NGO, KAAGAPAY Overseas Filipino Workers Resource Center.

The Journey Begins

As there was no schedule for a boat direct to Zamboanga City, we have to take the smaller boats plying the Cotabato City-Pagadian City route and from there another night of sea travel to Zamboanga City. Taking the plane was out of the question. We simply cannot afford it as our resources were low. We have to scrimp and budget, so in all our travels we always have our accommodations in the economy section.

Zamboanga City

Reaching Zamboanga City, we contacted our local network, KAHAPAN-Basilan and asked for updates on the situation of the deportees before going to Jolo,Sulu and Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, which were our destination. We were advised to stay a few days in Zamboanga City and visit the
deportation/processing centers as it seemed that most of the deportees were shipped to Zamboanga City. Being an open port, the deportees will have easier access for vessels or transportations in going home to their respective places.

As one of our tasks was to establish contacts with local groups in the areas whether it be from the NGOs, government agencies and the religious groups who were in direct contact with the deportees, the Team decided to visit the Social Action Center (SAC) at the Bishops’ Palace in Zamboanga City. One of their staff, arranged a meeting for the Team and the SAC Executive Director, Sis Dulce. It was obvious from our conversations that the nun was wary of our visit as several groups were coming to the place for different reasons. Some were out to really help while others to make money out of the plight and misery of the deported Filipino migrants. Nonetheless, Sis Dulce met with us and gave the Team an overview of the situation of the deportees in her personal view:

- Relief items for deportees were sufficient and the DSWD and the government were doing all it can do to respond to the needs of the deportees.

- The deportees do not stay long in the deportation centers. The situation was more of a “come and go” as everytime a new batch of deportees arrived, relief items were distributed to them. If they happen to live near Zamboanga City, they were provided with transportations to ferry them home. Only those who were living in Palawan and Cagayan de Sulu were left in the deportation centers due to unavailability of transportation. They were waiting for Alleson Shipping Lines, who offered their services, to fulfill its promise. Also, those husbands/wives, who are waiting for their spouses and children, who are still in detention in Malaysia, to arrive were left in the deportation centers. They chose to remain in the centers than risk not being able to see their families when they finally arrive.

- The parishes were continuously sending relief items to their office (SAC). In fact, the money intended by the parishes to be used for the deportees were still intact as donations for the deportees were pouring in.

- Tabang Mindanaw also coordinated with their office but SAC decided to turn it down stating that they can provide for the needs of the deportees with the relief that they had gathered.

Before the meeting ended, Sis Dulce offered to facilitate the Team in going through the deportation center in the Area Vocational Rehabilitation Center (AVRC), Talon-Talon, Zamboanga City where they have access and contact with the Social Workers of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). The AVRC is a place where clients of the DSWD with disabilities were housed. She assigned one of her staff to guide us through the deportation/processing center.

Our first impression upon entering the AVRC was that of being in a desert. The earth was so parched and arid and was the color of lime only more on the yellowish-white side. Clumps were evident as we trudged along with our guide. The deportees were sitting on wooden planks fashioned into beds were placed on the ground when we reached them. The beds were arranged in columns and what belongings they had for those lucky enough to bring theirs littered their makeshift beds. Plastic mats covered some portion of their beds and they were protected from the scorching heat of the sun by canvass cloths which served as their roofing. Before talking to them, we asked permission from the officer-in-charge to interview the deportees. We were allowed and received by the social workers as they were busy herding some groups of deportees who were scheduled to leave that day. As we begun our interview, we could read from the faces of those who were left behind the longing and resignation as they watched the jeepneys carrying their passengers slowly made their way out of the AVRC. Deep into conversation with one of the deportees, one of the biggest media outfit of the country arrived. The newscaster talked with the social workers and like us asked to interview the deportees. We were amazed when looking on to them, the person interviewed was told to pile all his
belongings at his back. His family was also made to join him in the video taking. Perplexed, we continued our interview while occasionally glancing at the tableau.

Hearing the stories of the deported Filipino migrants, the Team decided to visit the Regional Office of the DSWD and pay the Director a courtesy call. Unfortunately, she was in a meeting so we were accommodated by the Chief of the Operations Division. Telling her of our visit to the AVRC, we swapped stories of our respective interviews. Asked if the reports of sexual abuses were true and if its possible if we could met the victims, she told us that the said cases were kept confidential and even the media were not allowed to interview the victims. This, she said, was to protect the victims especially the Muslim women who were in danger of being ostracized by their relatives and communities. While on the topic of sexual abuses, we told her of reports about teenage girls (aged 13-15) who were currently in the custody of the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) after the place they were in were raid. These girls were allegedly “sold” as prostitutes in the City of Zamboanga and it was one of the father’s who tipped the NBI. The Division Chief was so surprised to hear it from us as the news had not reached the media yet so and they were keeping everything under wraps so she was very careful in discussing it. She neither confirmed nor denied the news but one of NBI’s medico-legal was seen coming from the Regional Director’s office attending the meeting. She lamented that cases regarding the deportees had a way of leaking to the media and they were often the last to know when cases of abuses reached their office. What they did during those times was to look for the alleged victims and confirm the news.

**Jolo, Sulu**

After four days of stay in Zamboanga City and finally meeting the deported Filipino migrants, we bought our tickets for Jolo and leave Zamboanga on a Sunday. Jolo has a record of being a notoriously conflict-laden place. We were cautioned to be very careful during our stay. Prior to our visit, we already made contact with the SAC and Vicariate of Jolo, headed by Fr. Vill who is also the Director of Justice and Peace Initiatives Center (JPIC). During our meeting, we discussed our experience in Zamboanga City and the situation of the deportees. He told us that most of the deportees in Jolo have already gone home to their respective places. They only stay in the processing centers for only a day. Most of the deportees who arrived were met by their relatives and if they are from Jolo, have gone home to their respective communities. Relief in terms of food, clothing and medicines were provided by DSWD while their office also provided food and shelter.

They have also identified one(1) community, Barangay Anuling, Patikul, Sulu, which still has 39 families (86 persons). Based from their experience with DSWD, where each family was given five(5) kilos of rice regardless of the number of family members per family, Fr. Vill and his staff came to the conclusion that the distribution of food ration was unequal. Thus, they came up with a scheme to give three (3) kilos of rice per person. So, with 86persons x 3kilos/person= 258 kilos of rice for Barangay Anuling alone. This is done with the other barangays where some deportees were staying. Aside from food, JPIC also provided temporary shelters for the deportees upon seeing the condition of their sleeping quarters, which was a solar dyer. Unfortunately, not all the families were provided with materials to build nipa huts due to financial constraints. Some of the families were able to build their huts while others were still in the process of building. While some of the families settled with their relatives.

The Team then expressed interest to visit Barangay Anuling in Patikul Sulu. Fr. Vill readily agreed and told us that he has to let his staff assigned in the area contact the Barangay Captain first to ask permission for the visit. We were granted an audience by the Barangay Captain but Fr. Vill did not come with us as he was already warned by the people to not exposed himself to the area. Earlier when their office distributed foods and other relief items, Fr. Vill went with the group in his desire to met the deported families. Usually, with an escort as the “Standard Operating Procedure” of the
local priest, that time Fr. Vill went alone with his staff. The neighboring sitios and barangays are
the bailiwick of the infamous Abu Sayaff Group ASG). In fact, during our visit, the other side of
Patikul, Sulu was under a massive military operation. The night before we left Jolo, warning was
spread around that the Marine Brigade will be attacked by the ASG anytime. The town is then about
to celebrate it’s founding anniversary, being one of the oldest town practicing local governance and
autonomy in the Philippine history.

The Team was able to go to Anuling, Patikul, Sulu by hiring an old jeepney to take us to the area.
The driver waited for us until we finished with our interview with the deportees, the barangay
captain and the local residents who hosted the deportees to their homes. Communication was a
barrier as the Team was not fluent with the local dialect so we seek the assistance of the local
officials to do the translation with the help of Jane, a JPIC staff sent by Fr. Vill to accompany us.
Living in small huts, the residents of Anuling, Patikul, Sulu still find compassion in their hearts and
shared their homes with the deportees who happened to be their distant relatives. Small huts which
were supposed to accommodate one family were forced to accommodate another set of family.
Employment also became a problem to them as there were no works available in the area.
Addressing their food problem, the local officials mobilized the community in planting more cassava,
which is the staple food among the residents, a predominantly Muslim Community.

Hearing news that the fourth batch of deportees will be arriving, the team decided to head for
Bongao, Tawi-Tawi where the boat carrying them will first dock. We said goodbyes to our new friends
and boarded the morning trip to Siasi, Sulu.

Siasi, Sulu

On our way to Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, we passed by Siasi, Sulu to meet the Parish Priest of the place, Fr.
Pol. He was one of the persons who facilitated our visit in Jolo. He told us that the Philippine Naval
Boat and Coast Guard was set to sail anytime of the week for Sabah, Malaysia to get the deportees
still detained in the Malaysian jail. The two vessels will be bringing with them to Malaysia the
Philippine Medical team who will see to the medical needs of the deportees as most of them are
weak and sick from the long period of confinement and maltreatment that they suffered from the
hands of the Malaysian authorities while in the detention centers. Fr. Pol even offered to facilitate
our going with the Medical Team to Sabah, Malaysia as one of the brothers, who is a doctor, is a
member of the medical team.

Bongao, Tawi-Tawi

As all three of us have not yet reached Tawi-Tawi, Fr. Pol volunteered to be our guide, where we
were able to meet the other brothers and priest from the Order of Mary Immaculate (OMI). The
Parish Priest of Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, Fr. Dodoy was kind enough to accommodate us in the convent.
Upon hearing our purpose in coming, they told us that we were just four (4) hours late as the two
boats sailed at 2AM. They told us that the medical team was in fact already running behind schedule
as they were set to sail earlier only there were issues that the group had to resolved as the per
diem to be received by the government officials in employees. Exasperated, they told us that the
Medical Team was supposed to be a voluntary act on the part of the Medical team but what
happened was the opposite. Most of the passengers of the two boats were not official members of
the contingent as they were the wife and children of the government officials and employees. Being
an all expenses paid trip, the unofficial passengers grab the chance for a free ride. Shaking their
heads, the priests said that the Philippine contingent going to Malaysia was much bigger in number
compared to the number of deportees that they were going to transport home. Asking them the
scheduled date of arrival of the two boats back to the Philippines, the priests could not give us a
definite answer as everything depends on how things turned out in Malaysia. We decided to visit the
local DSWD for a confirmation but like the priests, they were not able to give us a definite answer. As no deportees can be found in the DSWD’s center, the priests advised the Team to proceed to Sitangkai to see the “backdoor” route taken by most Filipinos in going to Sabah, Malaysia.

**Sitangkai, “The Venice of the South”**

Fr. Raul, the Parish Priest of Sitangkai was about to go back to his area. He invited us along so we hurried and rushed to the port. We bought tickets on board. The stewards and other passengers were surprised to see our faces as we have just disembarked that morning. The boat, a “roro type”, was the only boat scheduled to travel that week for the route that we have taken. Taking a nap, we were rudely awaken by the violent rocking of the boat as we reached open seas where boats to and from Australia and Papua New Guinea passed. Unaware, the Team thought that maybe there was a sudden storm but Fr. Raul laughingly assured us that it was completely “normal” as boats plying that route rarely go on schedule when a storm is brewing. The boat seesawed for ten minutes as the passengers groped and clutched on anything solid. We asked the priests where are the islands but we’re only told that we could not find any in the area as we’re totally surrounded by coral reefs. Living in dry land all our lives, we could not totally comprehend what the priest was saying. As we docked in Sitangkai port, Fr. Raul pointed to a burly man who waved to him. The man was the “driver” of the “temper” a kind of wooden motorized canoe bigger and more elongated in shape. It has a powerful engine and is the usual mode of transportation used by most Filipinos taking the “backdoor” route, that is, illegal entry to Malaysia. It takes the “temper” four-six hours to travel from Sitangkai to Sabah. The travel is usually done in the cloak of darkness and when they are already near the Malaysian borders the engines were cut off to avoid detection with the radar. They have to use paddles or those long poles to propel the canoes forward. In instances where they were caught by the Malaysian police, some of them got free by giving bribes such as giving out a bottle of rum or other alcoholic beverages. Others were not as lucky as they were really put to jail when caught.

We rode the “temper” after disembarking from the boat and was taken to the town proper of Sitangkai which was a ten-minute ride from the port. Fr. Raul then showed us the main thoroughfare of the town. Everyone going in and out of town has to ride in “temper” or those smaller canoes. The town was literally floating and Fr. Raul proudly and smilingly pronounced, “The Venice of the South”. The only land in the place was only 2.5 hectares which they made their public cemetery. Muslims and Christians alike buried their dead on that small piece of earth. Only, the people were careful to bury their dead during low tide so the corpses won’t be washed away by the water. The economic activity of the townspeople were “buy and sell” of goods. They get their goods from Sabah, Malaysia which is nearer to the town and not in Zamboanga City as it would mean a long and expensive travel. As some of the Filipino migrants interviewed said if you are a businessman and have ten thousand pesos (P10,000.00) for the purchase of goods then you can go in and out of Malaysia.

**Excerpts of Conversations with Deported Filipino Migrant Worker, Social Worker and local government official**

*Deportation site: Area Vocational Rehabilitation Center (AVRC), Talon-Talon, Zamboanga City*

**Nestor**

Age: 36  
Status: Married (wife, has complete papers, is still in Malaysia w/ the Children)  
Place of Origin: Palawan  
No. of years in Malaysia: 22 years in Kota Bulod, Kota Kinabalu
Type of work: Construction Worker

Experiences:
- captured on July 14, 2002; lost passport
- two(2) nights detained in Sandakan then brought to Roma Mira, Kota Kinabalu where he stayed with other deportees for a month
- jail is long with 224 persons; heavily guarded
- men and women were placed in separate jails; the children were with the women
- eat 2x a day (usual staple is cupful of rice w/ 2pcs of thumb-sized dried fish)
- treatment of Malaysian authorities for him was fair; those who were abused were plain stubborn
- accommodation and food in Philippine deportation/processing center are much better compared to their stay in Malaysian jail
- been in talon-Talon for 10 days; waiting for boat to ferry him home
- wants to go back to Malaysia but do not have the resources

Jean

Age: 27
Status: Married (has 3 children, 1 girl & 2 boys; husband still in jail in Malaysia for 3 months already)
Place of Origin: Novaliches
No. of years in Malaysia: 10 years in Iningao, Sabah

Experiences:
- surrendered voluntarily on June 25, 2002 with her three children; passport expired
- was brought to a look-up center in Kota Kinabalu where accommodation was better; passports were examined
- stayed for one(1) month in Kota Kinabalu then was brought to Sandakan where she was detained for another month.
- Treatment was better in Kota Kinabalu
- Deportees were placed in different blocks; she stayed in the Indonesian block where she has a friend
- Got slapped by a woman jail guard when she was late in taking a bath
- Visitors were made to pay R30-50 depending on one’s capacity to pay; if men visitors get too close to the women they were made to do push-ups.
- Foods left by visitors often do not reach the recipient’s hands, if they do, portions were already taken from the food.
- Had to bring her kids to the hospital when the latter got sick; she was handcuffed on her way to the hospital
- Been staying for 2 weeks in AVRC, Talon-Talon, Zambo. City waiting for the arrival of her husband
- Will go home either to Surigao (husband’s place) or Novaliches.
- Ashamed to go home to Novaliches because they are deportees

Adrian

Address in Malaysia: Likas, Kota Kinabalu
Address in Phil.: Palawan
Religion: Islam

Experiences:
- Lack of food and water in Detention center in Malaysia
- No passport when he went to Malaysia thru backdoor in Sitangkai Island. His parents are there in Malaysia.
- He was detained in Menggatal Detention Center in Kota Kinabalo for 2 months. If they made mistakes and trouble they will brought under the heat of the sun and for the whole day they will not given a food. The time they left detention center in Malaysia lot of Filipinos are still there subject for deportation.
- About there situation in DSWD Center, they are catered well, can eat good food, they are waiting for their way back to Palawan.

**Abdulrahman**

Age: 42  
Address in Malaysia: Likas, Kota Kinabalo  
Years in Malaysia: 6 years  
Work in Malaysia: Carpenter  
Address in Phil.: Palawan  
Religion: Islam

Experiences:
- No passport and went to Malaysia thru the “backdoor”  
- He was detained in Menggatal detention center for a month and caught by the police in Kudat, Sabah. They were detained in Kudat for 2 days.  
- His co-deportees experienced being punched, pumping, and others died over the heat of the sun.  
- Lack of food in detention center in Malaysia.  
- In DSWD center in Zamboanga City the food is good.  
- He plans to go back to Malaysia if he can get his passport.

**Wilson**

Age: 20  
Years in Malaysia: 1 year  
Work in Malaysia: Carpenter  
Address in Phil.: Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi  
Religion: Islam

Experiences:
- He was convinced by his cousin to go to Malaysia thru the “backdoor”, no passport  
- Lots of work in Malaysia compared to Phil.  
- He was captured by the police in his workplace, in Likas. That time, he has no money to pay the police for his release but he saw his friend paying the police and was freed.  
- Brought to Menggatal Detention Center and detained for 10 days.  
- 8 days in DSWD Center, food is well not like in Malaysia.  
- He experienced push up, punches from Malaysian police, there are about 20 persons in a room then they were in sitting position while sleeping many times water were thrown in their rooms by the Malaysian police.  
- Planning to go back to Malaysia but he wants to get passport first.  
- There are about 500 deportees still in the detention centers in Malaysia when they left for Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, Mindanao, Philippines.

**Ruben**

Address in Malaysia: Kolumbong, Kota Kinabalo  
Address in Phil.: Lustre, Sta. Barbara, Zamboanga City  
Years in Malaysia: 1 year and 1 month
Work in Malaysia: Carpenter
Religion: Islam

Experiences:
- Food is limited and there were more times that have no food.
- If you make mistakes there will be a corresponding punishment.
- He was brought under the heat of the sun for an hour and more.
- In DWSD centers food is good.
- He wants to go back in Malaysia.

Joy Gonzaga
In-Charge for NGO Donors Desk, DSWD RO IX, Officer of the Day, Area Vocational Rehabilitation Center

- There are 159 deportees for this day (Sept. 13, 2002), then others were sent home already.
- Ages 0-6, 7-13, from Cagayan de Tawi-Tawi and Palawan
- Their common diseases are colds for children and headache for adults. That is the findings of Dr. Eric, DWSD Doctor. The DOH is visiting us to check up the deportees.
- We have our social worker conduct a one on one counseling with the deportees for our psycho-social therapy.

Deportation site: Barangay Anuling, Patikul, Sulu

Jhol
Age: 37
Address in Malaysia: Ladato, Kota Kinabalo
Status: Married (with his 3 children and wife in the deportatuion center)
Work in Malaysia: Farmer
Address in Phil.: Sulu

Experiences:
- No passport when he went to Malaysia thru backdoor.
- He stayed a month in Detention Center in Sandakan Malaysia.
- Experienced many diseases especially his children like stomachache.
- They have given food twice a day.
- Many times, he was always given punch by the police.

Adzkil (with complete passport)

Age: 30
Status: Married (wife and 5 children are already with him in Anuling)
Wife: working in a Kaddai (Coffee shop) for 10 years in Sandakan
No. of years in Malaysia: 21 years in the following places: Sandakan, Kota Kinabau, and Sampurna
Type of Work: Construction worker

Experiences:
- captured on July and was jailed for 3 months in Roma Mira, Kota kinabalu and 1 night in Sandakan
- wife was captured at home and was jailed for three months
- he was deported first and the wife and the kids later
- took a bath thrice a month only
- eat twice a day
- many got sick especially the kids and sometimes they died
- many of the adults got sick, too, while others died of beatings
- just left to suffer when sick; if “known” then was brought to the hospital
- jail has 400 persons; others are sitting down while others are sleeping in piles
- escaped due to hunger but got caught; was hanged upside-down

Manshoush Shouk, Barangay Captain, Anuling, Patikul, Sulu

- The deportees in my Barangay came one month ago.
- There were 40 families or more than 100 hundred individuals.
- We help them for their temporary shelter and little capital to build and start a Variety store for one of the deportees.
- Their common illnesses are skin diseases due to the living conditions of the detention centers in Malaysia and diarrhea.
- We are hoping that others institutions could help us for the livelihood of these deportees in my Barangay.

A month has passed after the massive deportation but the news had died down. The Overseas Filipino Workers’ (OFWs) plight has again sunk to oblivion and took a backseat in the government’s priorities. Cases of human rights violations and sexual abuses committed by the Malaysian authorities were not even prosecuted. True, immediate relief were given but all of them were temporary. No lasting solutions were given that the problems they faced now will always remain a problem.

So many stories have been told which depicts the life of the Filipino migrant workers. Still, many were left untold of the horrors and indignities that they have to suffer in order to secure the future of the next generation. But up to what extent they have to suffer? Do the lives and “humanity” of the thousand OFWs will always be put in the balance because of a government’s ineptitude and lack of political will to assert itself in protecting its citizenry? Indeed, the OFWs have so much stories to tell.. only if you would care to listen...

P.S.

* Amabella L. Carumba is one of Sumpay-Mindanao’s Program Officer and is of the three-person Advance Team sent by the Consortium of NGOs to document the deportees and interview them as well as the Local Government Agencies and religious groups in Zamboanga City, Jolo, Siasi, and Sitangkai.