

Spare civilian lives, protect the Filipinos in Israel-Beirut conflict!

Wednesday 26 July 2006, by [Akbayan](#), [AP](#), [CARLOS Sixto](#), [CONTRERAS Volt](#) (Date first published: 25 July 2006).

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Dear Friends,

The deepening Israel-Lebanon conflict must cease and that the continuing attacks on civilians should be condemned. The adoption of measures should immediately commence to spare civilian lives! It is highly necessary for governments to work hand in hand in order to provide safe relocation of civilians away from the bombardment target areas. However, the Philippine government's evacuation efforts for its own citizens are not substantial as stated in the two reports found in this mailing entitled: "RP plea: Please allow Filipinos to hitch ride", Inquirer, dated 07/20/2006 and "Fund lack hampers Lebanon evacuation efforts—DFA spokesman", Associated Press, dated 07/19/2006. Herewith below is Akbayan's press statement, which strongly urge for action to provide "survival funds" to save the Filipino migrant workers in Lebanon. The fund for evacuation vessels to get the Filipinos out of Lebanon is the government's major headache to bring the Filipinos to safer grounds. It is expected that the international rescue units will prioritize their nationals and therefore, the help extended to our "kababayans" (compatriots) will only be secondary.

We have around 30,000 Filipinos living in Lebanon seeking greener pastures and like in many parts of the world they are growing in numbers. The loud cry of Pinoy workers abroad is that they "would rather die in war than in hunger". Is this the kind of thinking our people should possess? Amidst the forms of economic, political, and social violence we are experiencing today, our world no longer enjoys peaceful and democratic spaces. Certainly, all these boils down to the major failure of this current government to develop its own economy to stop, if not minimize the influx of Filipinos to foreign territories. And therefore, we say that this so called dollar remittance from our modern heroes is not the real gauge of economy in progress. At the moment, majority of these evacuees wouldn't want to return home due to absence of local employment and they would take all risks to survive even in the war-torn Middle-East countries.

Our urgent call is for these breaches of humanitarian international law to end and to put a stop to the killings of civilians caught up in the battlefield. The challenge is not only to protect the Filipinos abroad, but to help revive hopes for them to build lives with decent jobs in their homeland and for their safe return. Too bad the Arroyo government isn't doing enough!

In peace and solidarity,

International Committee
Akbayan! Citizen's Action Party

AKBAYAN! Citizen's Action Party

PRESS STATEMENT

Use Presidential 'survival funds' to evacuate Filipinos in Lebanon, GMA urged

Rep. Risa Hontiveros of AKBAYAN today urged President GMA to use the discretionary funds of the Office of the President to immediately move out Filipino migrant workers in Lebanon. She said that the resources that the administration has reportedly allotted to kill the new impeachment complaint should be used instead for a prompt evacuation of more than 30, 000 migrant workers from the beleaguered country in the Middle East. "Miracles won't be enough to save our workers from Israeli bombs," Rep. Hontiveros said. "The government has to stop dragging its feet to facilitate the immediate departure of our workers from Lebanon."

"Instead of buying off support in Congress or hosting 'envelopmental' dinners with some Bishops, the President should instead use her resources to finance the immediate evacuation of our workers in Lebanon," Rep. Hontiveros said. "Since the conflict continues to worsen, evacuation is our only option."

The opposition solon also urged Philippine embassies in conflict-prone areas to institutionalize 'exit plans' in case hostilities erupt. "We have thousands of workers in countries where conflicts are a constant threat. They don't have to wait for the first bomb to be dropped before they begin thinking of where to bring our workers or how they can safely get out of the country," Rep. Hontiveros added.

She likewise cautioned the government from mimicking the position of US President George Bush on the conflict between Israel and Lebanon. The US President said in a G8 meeting that Israel has a right to defend itself. "The best diplomatic stance is to be independent from the position of the US and urge for an immediate ceasefire. The extremism being practiced by the countries at war and the disproportionate reaction of Israel has pushed back the possibility of lasting peace in the Middle East. We should also actively call for a multilateral initiative under the UN to secure peace in the region," Rep. Hontiveros said.

"We always need to factor in the welfare of our overseas Filipino workers in our diplomatic policies. The conflict between Lebanon and Israel tells us that Philippine diplomacy must not be based on colonial servility, but should rather serve the welfare and the interests of our people," Rep. Hontiveros said. ###

RP plea: Please allow Filipinos to hitch ride

By Volt Contreras

Inquirer

Last updated 01:40am (Mla time) 07/20/2006

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT lacked in ships and aircraft, it tried to make up in letters to foreign countries pleading with them to let Filipinos hitch a ride in their evacuation vessels out of war-battered Lebanon.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) sent a barrage of notes verbales to various embassies — the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Italy — that were rushing to pull out their citizens from bombed-out Beirut.

“The problem is, we don’t have ships where our nationals can board, unlike the US and French,” DFA spokesperson Gilberto Asuque said. “We have very limited resources.” Also yesterday, the DFA announced a repatriation plan, called “Oplan Sagip OFW sa Lebanon,” as Israeli warplanes continued to pound Hezbollah bases there.

Malacañang said that a first batch of 200 “mostly distressed” overseas Filipino workers was to move out by bus today for the 90-km trip from Beirut to Damascus in Syria. There, they would be airlifted on Friday to Dubai and Manila by a chartered Kurdistan Airlines flight.

The 200 had sought refuge at the Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal parish in Beirut’s Christian district of Sassine. Another 900 Filipinos have registered to be moved out once an alert level 4 requiring a mandatory evacuation is declared.

The alert remained at level 3 yesterday, meaning Filipinos should leave their homes for relocation sites.

Maribeth Sayson, 36, a native of Argao town in Cebu province, sent a text message to her relatives from Beirut on Sunday saying: “What’s the latest news? We are OK here with God’s mercy. As of now, we have not heard any firing but we are not yet safe because we don’t know when the war will end.”

Sayson’s mother, Rosita, said her daughter was inquiring about government efforts to help the OFWs.

Another OFW worker told a relative, Margarita Luardo, also in Argao, in an SMS message to “Please pray for me. We are safe here but I don’t know what’s the latest news because we are still in the mountains.”

Foreign Undersecretary Esteban Cornejo, speaking to reporters after a meeting with President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo yesterday on efforts to help Filipinos in Lebanon, said that “she’s not going to count the cost for any OFW. Walang iwanan dito (No one will be left behind). Every life is sacred.”

The DFA said that it had requested, through its Office of European Affairs, the embassies of France, United Kingdom and Italy “for their assistance in accommodating overseas Filipino workers in their respective vessels out of Lebanon.”

The DFA also instructed Philippine missions in Paris, London and Rome to make “similar representations” or follow the matter up with their host states.

Chargé d’Affaires Evan Garcia of the Philippine Embassy in Washington said he had already made the same appeal to the US Department of State.

In reply, Garcia said the state department “advised that, although (its) first priority is the evacuation of American nationals, the US government will try to help evacuate Filipinos as well, to the extent

that it would be safe to do so, and within the limits of available resources.”

Garcia, in his report to the DFA, explained that for the United States to give such help, it would need information from Manila on the numbers, locations and identities of the Filipinos to be evacuated.

In a parallel move, the DFA also instructed Philippine embassies in the countries surrounding Lebanon to coordinate with their respective host states “to ensure the safe passage” of Filipino evacuees who may be crossing their borders.

Five “transit or staging points” outside Lebanon have also been designated for the repatriation — Cyprus, Turkey, Rhodes in Greece and Damascus and Tartus in Syria.

Finally, an exit plan

With 15 staffers manning its embassy in Beirut, Manila finally came out with a concrete exit plan days into the sustained Israeli air assault on the Middle East nation.

“As we speak, it is happening now,” Asuque told reporters in a briefing later, referring to the Beirut-Damascus bus trips which he said would kick off the government’s “Oplan-Sagip OFW sa Lebanon.”

Asked if the bus fleet would have military escorts, Asuque could only say that Philippine missions in Beirut and Tel Aviv have done “coordinations to ensure safe passage” for Filipino evacuees.

“We will speak with whoever is manning the checkpoints,” he stressed.

Relocation sites

Asuque said that aside from the Catholic parish, there were six other relocation sites in the city “but as much as possible we would like to concentrate them in just one site” for easier transport.

“This is what we mean by ‘innovative approach’,” he said, referring to his previous statement conceding the lack of ships or military aircraft the government could dispatch to speed up the exodus.

Cornejo said the movement of the 200 Filipinos had been cleared with the Israeli government by Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo. They include 80 distressed workers staying at Philippine resource centers in Beirut, 36 detained at deportation centers and others abandoned by their employers.

He said that the small number of Filipinos who had registered to move out meant many believed that the conflict was not widespread and had no immediate desire to repatriate.

“What government is providing them is the option (that) if you feel you are in danger, come to the relocation center. If you feel you are in danger in Lebanon, we will take you out of Lebanon,” he said.

“The decision will be yours at this time,” Cornejo said.

Repatriation voluntary

The government will only order a forced or mandatory evacuation in Lebanon if the violence in Lebanon becomes widespread and there is violence in the streets, Cornejo said. “At this point, it’s still voluntary on their part,” he said.

Labor Undersecretary Danilo Cruz said that the majority of Filipino workers in Lebanon were employed by Christian foreigners and were living in Christian districts — areas not being targeted by the Israelis.

The labor department is providing a 24-hour hotline telephone service for families of OFWs in Lebanon seeking information: +632 833-6992 or +632 551-1560 or text their message at +63917-8986992.

Cruz said that 10 phone lines would be made available in the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) office so that families could call up their loved ones in Lebanon. 'Not as dangerous'

Also yesterday, the United Philippine Manpower Agencies to Israel Association composed of 21 licensed overseas recruitment agencies deploying OFWs to Israel, said "everything was normal" in the big cities of Tel Aviv, Haifa and the southern part of Israel.

In a statement, Ramon Estrella, UPMAIA president, said the situation in Israel "was not as dangerous" compared to that in Lebanon. He said the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) had not stopped the processing of workers bound for Israel.

In a message relayed by the Apostolic Nuncio to the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, Pope Benedict XVI urged the Filipino faithful to pray for peace in the Middle East. With reports from Christine O. Avenda? o, Nikko Dizon, Jerome Aning, Christian V. Esguerra, and Joey A. Gabrieta, Jolene R. Bulambot, Jhunnex Napallacan and Carla P. Gomez, PDI Visayas Bureau, Associated Press

Fund lack hampers Lebanon evacuation efforts—DFA spokesman

Australia , New Zealand have their problems, too

Associated Press

Last updated 09:58pm (Mla time) 07/19/2006

SYDNEY , Australia — The lack of funds is hampering the Philippines' efforts to find safe passage for around 30,000 Filipinos living in Lebanon, according to an official of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

"The problem is, we don't have ships where our nationals can board, unlike the US and French," DFA spokesman Gilbert Asuque said. "We have very limited resources."

He said the government hoped to evacuate thousands of Filipinos —many of whom work as domestic servants — by sea to Cyprus or by road to Syria.

But until transportation options could be arranged, the government was advising citizens to take shelter at a church about eight kilometers (five miles) north of Beirut.

"Priority is to put Filipinos out of harm's way," he said, adding that about 200 Filipinos had sought shelter there.

But the Philippines is not the only country that is struggling to evacuate its citizens stranded in Lebanon, which is under siege from Israel after the Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers and refused to release them.

Aside from the lack of funds, logistical challenges and Israel's refusal to agree to a brief ceasefire were also hampering evacuation efforts by other countries concerned across the Asia-Pacific region.

Australia, the Philippines, and New Zealand were all scrambling to locate buses and ships capable of carrying more than 30,000 people to safety.

Australia was facing mounting criticism that it was not doing enough to help.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said his government had chartered a Turkish ship to carry hundreds of stranded Australians to Cyprus on Wednesday, but a gridlocked port in Beirut could force further delays.

"The logistics of managing that for everybody are not going to be very easy," he told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

Downer also said a Canadian ship could be available to evacuate around 100 Australians on Wednesday, and more could be rescued by British or American ships in the coming days.

Four buses carrying up to 100 Australian citizens left Beirut on Tuesday for Syria, but thousands more were left uncertain about when and how they would be able to flee.

About 5,000 citizens have registered with the Australian Embassy in Lebanon, and about 25,000 dual Australian-Lebanese citizens are believed to be living there.

Australia's government has come under intense pressure for its alleged failure to find a quick escape for its citizens in Lebanon, but Downer fiercely rejected criticism.

"Those people on the ground in Lebanon ... are risking their lives to try to get people out," Downer said. "If it were easy, it would have been done several days ago."

Israel's insistence that it won't ease its attacks or create a safe corridor for evacuations wasn't helping.

"The Israelis have so far said that this was a war zone and that they wouldn't agree to our requests," Downer said Tuesday.

Helen Tunnah, a spokeswoman for New Zealand's foreign affairs department, said the government was drawing up plans to move up to 90 New Zealanders to Cyprus, but was unsure when the evacuations would start.

Tunnah said Britain had agreed to assist its nationals if required and New Zealand's first option was to get evacuees onto British warships. New Zealand has no diplomatic post in Lebanon.

She said Australia also indicated it may be able to help.

Australia's ambassador to Lebanon, Lyndall Sachs, was worried about 400 Australian families living in southern Lebanon, saying embassy officials had been unable to contact all of them.

"We've been in contact with quite a few of them, of course many of them haven't been able to get through, they are facing shortages of food and water," Sachs told ABC radio. "It's a very, very difficult situation down there for many, many people, and we hold grave concerns for them."

She said only an Israeli cease-fire would allow safe evacuations.