

OPINION & FEATURES

A taste of haven

THE news from London is worrying—but it is not as bad as it originally seemed. That the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the de facto club of the world's developed economies, classified the Philippines as "uncooperative" in the matter of tax information exchange is unwelcome news indeed. But it is news that needs to be put in context.

In the first place, the Philippines is not a tax haven—not by any loose definition of the term, and not according to the OECD's own standards. The organization recognizes that there is no "technically precise definition" of a tax haven, but suggests three defining elements: "low or zero taxation, a lack of transparency and a refusal to provide information to foreign tax authorities." In 1998, a groundbreaking OECD publication zeroed in on the essential characteristic of a tax haven: "The absence of tax or a low effective tax rate on the relevant income is the starting point of any evaluation."

In the second place, the Philippines was not included in the OECD's June 2000 list of tax havens, an itinerary of tax evasion-enabling destinations that included the likes of Andorra, Monaco and Liechtenstein. Indeed, as late as last year, these three havens were identified as "jurisdictions which refused to make such commitments" as necessary to increase transparency and exchange of information.

In the third place, the Philippines is not part of

GUEST EDITORIAL

the massive international tax haven business.

What the OECD did announce, in a progress report it released last week, was that only four economies "had not submitted to the internationally agreed tax standard"—namely Uruguay, Costa Rica, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Most of the actual tax havens identified in 2000 escaped ignominy by the simple expedient of promising substantial compliance with OECD standards, landing in the so-called "gray" list of economies which "have committed to the internationally agreed tax standard, but have not yet substantially implemented" the OECD convention.

It is important to note that it wasn't only Malaysia or the Philippines that complained about the OECD listings. Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker of Luxembourg, included in the gray list, grumbled: "I think that the treatment given to some countries is a bit incomprehensible." The Swiss foreign office noted pointedly that "The list does not specify the criteria on the basis of which it was drawn up.



Photo courtesy of Inquirer.net

For that is the reality. The tax havens continue to siphon off billions of dollars from economies large and small, income which—if it had been properly taxed—would have helped fund more of the public spending a global economy in recession needs.

None of this is to say that the Philippines should

not work speedily to get itself stricken off the black list. Finance Secretary Margarito Teves has already outlined the limits of our response: "Invariably, this will require consultation, study and action by the Philippine Congress." Or that we don't have our share of tax evasion problems. (*Inquirer.net*)

Servants or cosmopolitans?

ARE we a "nation of servants"? As the outrage over Hong Kong columnist Chip Tsao's remarks that the Philippines is a "nation of servants" dies down, the bitter truth of his statements lingers. Many of us would still probably want him to rue the minute he penned those derogatory thoughts, but such sentiments are not unique to himself; these are shared, although not bluntly stated, by many of the citizens in countries

COMMENTARY

Andrea Soco

that benefit from the export of female Filipino labor.

There is no excusing Tsao's statements or his demeaning opinions of his Filipino maid, but the fact is, they do have a basis. In an attempt to keep the economy afloat, the Philippine government continues its policy of out-migration, instituted in line with the requirements of the international market. The nation's leader herself goes gallivanting across the globe to sell Filipino labor, which today is almost always equated with women. Nursing and care-giving schools proliferate and market themselves on the basis of their ability to provide graduates with international placements. The government itself has a domestic worker training program, previously known as "Supermaid," that aims to train women in domestic skills to obtain higher pay abroad. Thus, it should not come as a surprise to us when Hong Kongers or Singapor-

eans or Italians or people of other nations think of Filipinos as "servants." We ourselves are actively constructing this particular characterization as "slaves," and are therefore partly to blame.

On a smaller scale, how many of us, in our travels abroad, would condescend to talk to those we deem as domestic workers on the plane? The remark given by Tsao has affected many middle-class sensibilities precisely because we want to differentiate ourselves from "them," from the supposed low-skilled workers who toil in homes instead of offices. On the plane, in the airport, migrant workers are treated in a remarkably distinct way and those of us traveling for leisure or business would strive to make known that we are not like them. Even immigration officials here are more wary of females who travel to countries with a significant domestic worker population. So before we become too sensitive to what foreigners who grew up in an environment steeped in Filipino migrant labor say, we also have to be critical of ourselves.

Having lived in Singapore as a student for some years now, these kinds of sentiments are part of my everyday reality. In a country with a population of roughly four million, more than a hundred thousand of which are Filipino domestic workers, I am constantly faced with the need to bolster the popular image of the Filipino female. In the course of my associations with Filipino domestic workers there, I found that as part of the mobile non-elite, these migrant workers gain not only the means to raise

their level of consumption, but also cultural skills and a kind of awareness generated from a particular engagement with the world. They become, in some way, cosmopolitan.

The popular notion of cosmopolitanism is reflected when Filipino domestic workers in Singapore engage in class-based leisure activities that include shopping, hiking and skating, traveling to nearby countries, and being able to use technology such as e-mail and online messaging to keep in touch with friends and families in the Philippines. They also try to dress well on their off-days. As Lucy, 40, mentioned, "*pag-weekday katulong talaga*" [on weekdays, we are truly servants]. Sunday is the only time when they can get dressed so they feel that they should take advantage of this.

My interviews with domestic workers in Singapore also revealed how they actively seek self-actualizing opportunities whenever possible. For instance, a number of them engage in volunteer work and enroll in self-improvement classes. Rebbie, 54, is a volunteer music teacher at Bayanihan Centre, a venue for Filipinos, particularly domestic workers, to engage in educational activities. She said that if she had not been in Singapore, she would never have been able to study music. Rebbie is currently taking voice, theory and opera classes while also working as a domestic helper, an endeavor that she says is fully supported by her employer. She will be obtaining a diploma soon, which is what she has been aspiring for so

she can set up a music school when she goes back to the Philippines.

Filipino domestic workers also have notions of equality with fellow Filipinos that are not class-based. They, for instance, feel that they are on equal footing with professional female Filipinos in Singapore despite the differences in occupational categories, mainly because they are all foreigners in a foreign land. They are insulted whenever professional Filipinos distance themselves from non-professionals so as not to be mistaken for domestic helpers. According to Sal, they have no right to look down on them because "*lahat naman tayo katulong dito. Kami katulong sa bahay, sila sa kumpanya* [Here we are all hired help; we serve in the house, they serve in companies]."

Perhaps instead of focusing on Tsao's remark as an insult, let us use it to reflect on how exactly we treat our migrants. The structural factors are hard to change. I am not against out-migration, seeing it as a reality in a country with very little in terms of economic opportunities for people with a less-than-prominent educational background. But maybe we can do something in terms of how we treat those who leave, and those who return, whatever their occupation may be. Maybe in recognizing migration as a means, not to be servants to the world, but to better themselves and broaden their outlooks, we can avoid the pitfalls of constructing our own fellow Filipinos as slaves. Perhaps then the truth will hurt less. (*Inquirer.net*)

Congratulations from the (vice) mayor of QC

IN early April of last year, Bayani Fernando, tarpaulin king of Manila, was caught spending Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA) funds to finance the printing of his MMDA posters. His face, less several chins, looked blankly out of tarpaulins tacked to the pink-painted overpasses of the metropolis. Chubby fist clenched, his carefully grim visage enjoined citizens to support "order," and "discipline."

METHOD TO MADNESS

Patricia Evangelista

Fernando claimed his was not an electoral campaign. It was a campaign for a better Manila.

he was simply the medium. MMDA general manager Robert Nacianceno came to his boss' defense, even as Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay had the posters ripped off his city's walls. Nacianceno claimed a sign could only be called a campaign poster if it bears messages of "Happy Valentine's" or, depending on the season, "Congratulations, Graduates."

district, best known for the tantrum she threw in the House of Representatives during discussions of the RH bill. Congratulations, says Mayor Sonny Belmonte, a departure from his usual self-congratulatory announcements splashed across Quezon City. Congratulations, says Ms Joy Belmonte, described in the city's website as "the daughter of Mayor Belmonte who is involved in various civic organizations," rumored to be her father's successor in the grand tradition of Philippine dynastic politics.

Perhaps the most interesting of all congratulatory messages comes from the vice mayor, known best for his role as "Gilbert" in the 1984 teen hit *Bagets*. The gentleman who calls himself Bistek is also a product endorser, his name and position plastered on billboards side-by-side with skin whitening soap and men's apparel. Vice Mayor Herbert M. Bautista, who is said to be eyeing the 2010 mayoral seat, shows himself a master in graphic design. His posters, scattered across the city, announce his great joy in welcoming the new graduates. Congratulations graduates, say his posters, from Mayor Herbert "Bistek" Bautista. A closer—much closer—inspection will turn up "Vice" conveniently printed in white against a pale background and outlined in thin black, right before the word "Mayor."

Other posters are less subtle. In great block letters: Mayor Herbert "Bistek" Bautista, with a tiny "Vice" printed over the word "Mayor." The passing motorist intent on negotiating Quezon City traffic will only register the fact that the good mayor Bautista is pleased with the city's new graduates,

and even the critical reader will be hard-pressed to detect Bistek's full title once the sun sets on the city Belmonte claims is the "place where you can be future perfect." Name recall, after all, constitutes a great percentage of "winnability" [winning chances].

Quezon City is not the only Metro Manila city with such proud local leaders. In the case of Manila, Rep. Trisha Bonoan-David's coiffed hair and pearly-white smile graces every possible corner, the same picture copy-pasted into a variety of hanging billboards declaring her support for everything including dialysis treatments to college scholarships to mushroom-growing seminars.

Perhaps the most stunning of all congratulatory campaigns is the recent graduation-turned-"miting de avance" [final campaign rally] in Santa Cruz, Marinduque. The Malindig Institute's 83rd commencement exercises and graduation rites had the ousted president Joseph Estrada encouraging the graduates to relive what was taught to them in school, which was to love God, family and country, emphasizing love of country at a time most Filipinos had forgotten it.

Ernesto Maceda, playing ringmaster, also added what shouldn't be forgotten: Juan Ponce Enrile and Jinggoy, Estrada's son, in the 2010 senatorial elections.

So spoke convicted plunderer Estrada, "Do not lie. Do not cheat. And do not steal."

The other prominent personalities present during the graduation rites who gave their speeches

were Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay, Gina de Venecia, wife of former House speaker Jose de Venecia Jr., and Grace Poe, daughter of the late presidential candidate Fernando Poe Jr.

And although some parents offered "no comment" when asked about their opinion regarding the former action hero's speech, Senate President Enrile—also present—said that with the warm reception Estrada gets in his provincial sorties from local residents, it's only Estrada who can unify the country, destined by God, chosen by men. "Hoy come [Estrada] always gets a warm reception from the public despite the negative news about him?" said Enrile. "Erap [Estrada] is destined to become president again. Only Erap can unify Philippine society."

De Venecia and Poe, in their speeches, focused on introducing themselves and their various achievements in the field of public service. They did remember to congratulate the graduates.

It is likely we will be seeing more of these campaigns in the next few Hallmark events, until the campaign season officially allows the joys of self-promotion. There will be congratulations on Father's Day, Mother's Day, Grandparent's Day, Independence Day, National Heroes' Day, Women's Day, Boy Scouts' Month, Animal Rights' Day, World Malaria Day, World Wetlands Day, and of course, on the Philippines' official Software Freedom Day. And being the good Catholics they are, I expect our good leaders to congratulate Jesus for his resurrection on Easter Sunday. (*Inquirer.net*)



Main Office:
1150 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90017-1904
Tel: (213) 250-9797 • Fax: (213) 481-0854
e-mail: info@asianjournalinc.com
http://www.asianjournal.com

Manila Office:
Suite 208, The Manila Bank Corp., Bldg.
6772 Ayala Ave., Makati City 1226
Tel.: (632) 893-1720 • Fax: (632) 813-8746

New York and New Jersey:
5 Penn Plaza, Ste. 1932, New York, NY 10119
Tel.: (212) 655-5426 • Fax: (212) 655-9241

2500 Plaza Five, Harborside Financial Center,
Jersey City, NJ 07311
Tel.: (201) 484-7249 • Fax: (201) 484-7201

Las Vegas Sales Office:
3700 W. Desert Inn Road
Las Vegas, NV 89102
Tel.: (702) 792-6678 • Fax: (702) 792-6879

ROGER LAGMAY ORIEL
Publisher & Chairman of the Board

CORA MACABAGDAL-ORIEL
President & Executive Editor

BELLE M. SISON
Executive Vice President
Los Angeles Asian Journal

MONETTE ADEVA MAGLAYA
Senior Vice President
Los Angeles Asian Journal

IVY MANALANG
Vice President - Marketing

MOMAR VISAYA
Editor-in-Chief

JOSEPH PERALTA
Associate Editor

SHARON ANN BATHAN
Features Editor

MARIA LOURDES HALILI
Advertising Editor

DANTE SAMBLAY
Art Director

ANDY TECSON / TED TALAG
Photographers

BANDER LAW FIRM, LLP
Legal Counsel

ADVERTISING AND ADVERTORIAL POLICIES

Asian Journal Publications, Inc. ("AJPI") reserves the right to refuse to publish, in its sole and absolute discretion, any advertising and advertorial material submitted for publication by client. ("Client's Material")
Submission of an advertisement or advertorial to an AJPI sales representative does not constitute a commitment by AJPI to publish a Client's Material. AJPI has the option to correctly classify any Client's Material and to delete objectionable words or phrases.
Client represents and warrants that a Client's Material does not and will not contain any language or material which is libelous, slanderous or defamatory or invades any rights of privacy or publicity; does not and will not violate or infringe upon, or give rise to any adverse claim with respect to any common law or other right whatsoever (including, without limitation, any copyright, trademark, service mark or contract right) of any person or entity, or violate any other applicable law; and is not the subject of any litigation or claim that might give rise to any litigation.
Publication of a Client's Material does not constitute an agreement to continue publication.
Client agrees and covenants to indemnify AJPI and its officers against any and all loss, liability, damage, expenses, cost, charges, claims, actions, causes of action, recoveries, judgments, penalties, including outside attorneys' fees (individually and collectively "Claims") which AJPI may suffer by reason of (1) Client's breach of any of the representations, warranties and agreements herein or (2) any Claims by any third party relating in any way to Client's Material.
AJPI will not be liable for failure to publish any Client's Material as requested or for more than one incorrect insertion of a Client's Material. In the event of an error, or omission in printing or publication of a Client's Material, AJPI shall be limited to an adjustment for the space occupied by the error, with maximum liability being cancellation of the cost of the first incorrect advertisement or republication of the correct advertisement.
Under no circumstances shall Asian Publications, Inc. be liable for consequential damages of any kind.

ASIAN JOURNAL PUBLICATIONS, INC. publishes the Los Angeles Asian Journal, published twice a week; the Orange County and Inland Empire Asian Journal, Northern California Asian Journal, Las Vegas Asian Journal and the New York / New Jersey Asian Journal which are published once a week and distributed to Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange Counties, Northern California, Las Vegas and New York and New Jersey respectively.
Articles published in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the publisher. Letters to the Editor are welcome. Letters must contain complete name and return address. The materials, however, are subject to editing and revisions.
Contributions and advertising deadlines are every Mondays and Thursdays. For advertising rates and other information, please call the L.A. office at (213) 250-9797 or the Las Vegas Sales Office at (702) 792-6678 or send us an email at info@asianjournalinc.com