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Filipinos in HK fear infection, job loss

by COOKIE B. MICALLER
Inquirer.net

HONG KONG—When Hong Kong confirmed its first case of H1N1 flu last week, housemaid Chloe Belle Dogeno felt a sense of *deja vu*, knowing that the days of endless house cleaning, wiping of doorknobs and washing of rugs, towels and bed sheets were here again, like when the Severe Acute Respiratory Syn-

drome (SARS) outbreak struck the bustling territory in 2003.

But her worries, like many of the 130,000 Filipino housemaids in this Chinese territory, go beyond the extra house chores, the expected restrictions by her employer to meet her friends, or her health.

It's the thought of getting fired if she gets infected, a tragedy for the 42-year-old breadwinner and the family she feeds

and siblings she sends to school back home in Dumangas, Iloilo.

She has worried about losing her job when the global economic meltdown sparked massive layoffs. Now, a new storm is brewing.

"Now that the swine flu is here, it means more hard work for me—changing the doormats, bed sheets and towels more often. I have to do a lot of wiping again," Dogeno said.

She remembered the things she did when SARS hit a few years ago. "I had to put a pail filled with Chlorox and disinfectant by the door so my wards—couple and their two children—could wipe their shoes and things before entering. I had to constantly change the doormats and wipe the toilet," she said.

She said she would be very careful now with hygiene because of the repercussions should she lose her job. "If I get terminated, I'm not the only one who will go hungry. It will be a tragedy for my family in the Philippines," Dogeno said.

Mexican tourist

Hong Kong, where memories of the 2003 deadly SARS outbreak are still fresh, became the first Asian country to have a confirmed case of H1N1 flu when an unidentified Mexican tourist flew into Shanghai then traveled on to Hong Kong via China Eastern Airlines.

He developed fever on arrival last April 30 and is now in stable condition and isolated in the hospital.

Authorities, however, immediately put all the guests and staffers of the 100-room Metropark Hotel in Hong Kong's Wan Chai entertainment and business district under quarantine in a desperate effort to prevent the infection from spreading.

Officials have conducted medical checkups on about 200 of the guests and staff holed up at Metropark. Sixty people who had mild symptoms were taken to hospitals for follow-up checkups, Thomas Tsang, controller of the Center of Health Protection, was quoted as saying on radio RTHK's website last May 2.

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