

RP calls for greater protection of migrants at World Conference on Racism

GENEVA, SWITZERLAND—The Philippines delivered a strong statement in support of the international fight against racism and called for greater protection of the human rights of migrants at a World Conference on Racism held in Geneva, Switzerland.

Undersecretary Severo S. Catura of the Office of the President and Executive Director of the Presidential Human Rights Committee of the Philippines said before the High-Level Segment of the Durban Review Conference that in the context of the current global financial and economic crises, migrants are especially vulnerable "to lose jobs...and can be exposed to social exclusion, exploitation and xenophobia."

The Philippine delegate called on all governments that have not done so to consider signing and ratifying the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (ICPRMW)—a core international human rights treaty that seeks to ensure protection and non-

discrimination of migrants and members of their families.

"Migrants have become even more vulnerable in this global era, and thus need greater protection of their human rights as well as protection from racism and xenophobia," stated Catura.

The Philippines is presenting its initial report to the United Nations Committee on Migrant Workers, the expert body which oversees implementation of the ICPRMW, this week also in Geneva.

The Philippines is a state party of the ICPRMW which to date has 37 countries signing up to it, although most of these are countries of origin of migrants. In order to be more effective in its coverage, destination countries have to also accede to the treaty.

The Philippine delegation in Geneva led by Permanent Representative Ambassador Erlinda F. Basilio actively and constructively participated in negotiations on the outcome document of the Durban Review Conference. The Philippines proposed paragraphs on protection of the human

rights and welfare of migrants and combating discrimination against migrants, including migrant domestic workers.

The Philippine delegation also contributed the section in the outcome document devoted to combating human trafficking, especially women and children, which can be spurred by racism. These paragraphs focus on the need to enhance international cooperation in order to eradicate trafficking and promote a human rights-based approach in identifying and providing assistance and treatment to victims.

The Philippines likewise proposed language on the importance of addressing poverty and underdevelopment which exacerbates differences between peoples.

In his statement before the Conference, Catura shared the Philippines' experiences in conducting interfaith dialogues at the local, national, regional, and international levels as best practices in the promotion of tolerance, understanding and cooperation among different religious

and ethnic groups.

Historically, the Philippines has always been an ardent supporter of the fight against racism. In 1982, the Manila Declaration Against Apartheid recalled that apartheid was a crime against humanity. It was in this vein that the Philippines supported the convening of the 2001 Durban Conference on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, as well as its 2009 edition being held in Geneva.

The outcome document of the Geneva Conference was adopted by consensus on 21 April 2009.

In closing, Catura emphasized that the adoption of the outcome document was a collective and timely achievement in the fight against racism, and showed that "when there is the requisite political will, we, the members and observers of the United Nations, can overcome our differences and make a difference in the lives of the victims of racism." (www.gov.ph)

Panel OKs bills raising House members to 300

MANILA—A House of Representatives panel Wednesday, April 22, approved a measure raising the maximum number of lawmakers from 250 to 300.

A member of the House said this would address questions about a Supreme Court ruling adding 33 more lawmakers to the House membership.

Two measures to increase the number of seats were approved at the hearing of the House committee on the revision of laws chaired by Isabela Rep. Giorgidi Aggabao.

In the upper chamber, Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile Wednesday withdrew his bill, Senate Bill No. 2123, which had sought to increase the number of House seats from the current 238 to 350 to address the country's ballooning population.

Enrile said the Supreme Court decision that increased party-list representation in the House would inadvertently increase the seats allotted for regular members of the House.

"With this formula by the Supreme Court there is no need for any new law to increase the number of seats in the House of Representatives. We have now a guide coming from the highest court in the land," he said. "With this decision, I decided to withdraw my bill."

Supreme Court decisions form part of the law of the land, he said. So to create additional congressional districts, the proponents only need to seek the permission of both the House and Senate.

Local bill

It would now be in the form of a local bill to be concurred in by the Senate, said Enrile.

He said there would be no more need for a "general law" to set the new size of the House before Congress could create new districts.

In the House, the two bills raising the number of lawmakers to 300 were passed by a vote of 4-3 in the committee on the revision of laws. (Inquirer.net)

Vagni rescue gets green light

MANILA—The Sulu provincial crisis committee negotiating the release of the remaining Red Cross worker taken hostage by the Abu Sayyaf has authorized the military and police to proceed with rescue operations.

Sulu Gov. Abdusakur Tan, chairman of the crisis committee, said he had given the green light for the security forces to proceed with the rescue of Italian Eugenio Vagni "if there is an opportunity."

"Given the opportunity we will do that...it is how it should be, given that, when we see the opportunity of course we want to extricate (Vagni)," Tan said.

According to Tan, government troops in the area were given the order to launch the rescue operation after Swiss national Andreas Notter was able to walk free from his captors last April 18.

The military said Vagni is in pain and unable to walk after more

than three months in captivity in the dense jungles of Sulu.

Vagni had previously been reported as needing surgery for hernia, with Jolo Island's harsh terrain also said to be taking a toll on his emotional state.

Abu Sayyaf gunmen seized Vagni, Notter and Filipino Jean Mary Lacaba of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Jan. 15. Lacaba was released on April 2 while Notter was rescued last April 18.

While a rescue operation would be risky, Tan assured the troops are under strict orders to recover Vagni alive and unharmed.

Tan said the crisis committee has taken into consideration the deteriorating health of Vagni, which prompted them to take the military option to end the three-month hostage crisis.

Latest intelligence reports indicated Vagni could no longer walk because of his condition, ICRC

hostage crisis spokesman Lt. Col. Edgard Arevalo said last April 21.

He said troops were continuing to apply "calibrated pressure" on the Abu Sayyaf, which has splintered into three groups in a bid to confuse the authorities.

"Reports say he is well but unable to walk due to hernia," Arevalo said.

"Aside from the calibrated pressure to deny the bandits freedom of movement, the kidnapers are saddled with the fact that Vagni is not ambulant and must be carried," he said.

Arevalo said Vagni was "alive but under tight guard."

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), on the other hand, expressed confidence on its ability to successfully rescue Vagni.

AFP Civil Relations Service chief Brig. Gen. Gaudencio Pangilinan said the rescue of Vagni remains the top priority of military forces deployed in Sulu. (Philstar.com)

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