

Retailers cut 21,000 jobs in June

by ANNE D'INNOGENZIO
AP Writer

NEW YORK—Retail job cuts moderated in June, when US merchants trimmed 21,000 as they kept shuttering stores, but weakness in the overall job market looms over retailers, who need consumers to spend more freely.

June was the 17th straight month that retailers cut jobs, but they trimmed much less than their 12-month industry average of 50,000, according to Sophia Koropecyk, managing director of Moody's Economy.com, a division of Moody's Analytics.

Retail, among the sectors most sensitive to the consumer spending slowdown, was one of the first to slash jobs, accounting for as much as 25 percent of all jobs lost at the worst point late last year. But that share has been declining.

Retailers employ about 11.2 percent of all American workers. Year-to-date, retail job losses accounted for about 7 percent of the overall jobs lost.

But Koropecyk said the industry is "not out of the woods because the employment situation is deteriorating." Employees in all industries are working fewer hours or have had to take pay cuts, she noted, and those trends could have

big implications for stores, which need shoppers to open their wallets.

Employers overall cut a larger-than-projected 467,000 jobs in June, pushing the unemployment rate up to a 26-year high of 9.5 percent, indicating that an economic recovery will be rocky.

Koropecyk expects employers to keep slashing jobs through at least mid 2010, and she predicts the jobless rate will exceed 10 percent by early next year.

June's overall payroll reduction was higher than the 363,000 drop economists expected, but the rise in unemployment—from 9.4 percent in May—wasn't as sharp as the expected.

In the retailing sector, motor vehicle and parts dealers shed the most jobs, losing 10,500. Auto dealers cut 8,900, while building material and garden supply stores shed 4,100, furniture and home furnishings stores lost 2,100; and clothing and accessories stores lost 2,300.

Among the positive signs Koropecyk sees is that some retail sectors added significant numbers of jobs. Food and beverage stores added 1,500, while health and personal-care retailers added 1,200. ■

PATH calls for justice for victims of communist atrocities in RP

NEW YORK—WHEN GOVERNMENT forces commit human rights violations, victims can either go to the courts, cry out loud through the media and file complaints before the United Nations. But when non-state armed groups (NSAGs) torture or execute ordinary people, or even their own comrades, they are usually considered mere statistics of an insurgency war, according to a group called Peace Advocates for Truth and Healing (PATH).

Four officers of PATH are here now in the United States to brief Philippine consulate officials, the Filipino-American communities and media on the plight of the victims of communist and Islamic rebels in the Philippines. PATH is composed of surviving victims of the bloody communist purges in the Philippines during the 1980s and early 90s.

"Victims of atrocities by NSAGs have nowhere to go to get justice," said Robert Francis Garcia, author of the book "To Suffer Thy Comrade," which chronicles his own experiences of torture and near-death in the hands of his former comrades in the communist rebel movement in the Philippines, who suspected him to be a government agent. PATH claims more than 3,000 people have been brutally tortured and murdered during the purges.

"It is usually very easy to denounce government for human rights violations committed by soldiers and the police," said Garcia. "In fact, the extreme Left has a ready mechanism for that through the group called Karapatan. But Karapatan, by design, only denounces violations committed by the state, and never those committed by the communist rebels," he added.

Earl Parreno, also a writer and former rebel political officer, said the abductions, torture and killings of ordinary people by rebel groups have remained unabated, and the survivors and the victims' families have nowhere to go for relief and justice.

He cited the recent killing of Evelyn Pitao, sister of New People's Army commander Leoncio Pitao, and her husband Roberto Dadula. Pitao was executed for being a suspected military agent. "They (the NPA) are hunting down peasant leaders in the Bondoc Peninsula and Masbate who are advocating for agrarian reform, and have been recruiting children as combatants," he said.

"Government is cold and usually unresponsive to such cases, which are considered mere criminal acts. Probably for government, it is a good thing that rebels are murdering their own kind," he added.

"We denounce extrajudicial executions and torture committed by the military and police, and that we subscribe to the view that government holds primary responsibility for the protection and promotion of human rights. But violations of NSAGs should also be visible in the radar screen of human rights advocates, governments and the international community," PATH said in a statement.

The group said Philippine laws, and even the UN tenets on human rights, are not sufficiently addressing the atrocities by NSAGs as violative to human rights.

Aside from New York, the PATH leaders have so far visited San Francisco and Chicago. They are on their way to Washington to participate in the observance of the Torture Survivors Month (June), and to bring their case before US lawmakers and government officials. ■



Officers of Peace Advocates for Truth and Healing (PATH) visited the Philippine Consulate General in New York recently to brief consulate officials and the Filipino American community on the plight of communist and Islamic rebels in the Philippines.

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Study: New flu inefficient in attacking people

WASHINGTON—With swine flu continuing to spread around the world, researchers say they have found the reason it is—so far—more a series of local blazes than a wide-ranging wildfire.

The new virus, H1N1, has a protein on its surface that is not very efficient at binding with receptors in people's respiratory tracts, researchers at the Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology report.

"While the virus is able to bind human receptors, it clearly appears to be restricted," Ram Sasisekharan, lead author of the report, said in a statement.

But flu viruses are known to mutate rapidly, the research team noted, so this one must be watched closely in case it changes to become easier to spread.

On June 11, the World Health Organization declared a level 6 pandemic alert for H1N1. More

than 300 people have died and more than 70,000 people have been infected, according to the WHO.

It's currently flu season in the Southern Hemisphere and the spread of the virus in Argentina has prompted schools there to give students an early vacation and one province to declare a public health emergency.

On Thursday, July 2 Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius said the United States will provide 420,000 treatment courses of the antiviral medicine Tamiflu to the Pan-American Health Organization to help fight the flu in Latin America and the Caribbean.

"Viruses know no borders. The US recognizes that a novel virus such as the H1N1 is a burden borne by all nations, and all of us have a responsibility to help support one another in the

face of this challenge," Sebelius said at a meeting of health ministers in Mexico.

Sasisekharan's paper, meanwhile, warned that the H1N1 strain might just need a single change or mutation to make it resistant to Tamiflu.

And the illness is not limited to the south.

England's health minister said Thursday that his country faces a projected 100,000 new swine flu cases a day by the end of August and must revamp its flu strategy. Britain has officially reported 7,447 swine flu cases and three deaths, but officials acknowledge the real number of cases is far higher, since many with the virus have not been tested.

Vaccine makers, meanwhile, are working to develop shots for use in the fall and winter if the flu continues to spread. (AP)

Masses yearn to huddle in Liberty's reopened crown

by SUZANNE MA
AP Writer

NEW YORK—It's crowded. It's hot. You have to climb hundreds of steps to get there. And throngs of people can't wait to visit.

Unfortunately, many will have to. Tickets sold out fast for the July Fourth reopening of the Statue of Liberty's crown, closed since shortly after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Aaron Weisinger, a 26-year-old from Walnut Creek, Calif., was one of the lucky ones. He will be part of the first group of tourists in eight years to climb the 354 steps, 146 of them up a narrow spiral staircase, to stand atop the statue's head and peer from under the spikes of her crown.

"The statue is very powerful. It symbolizes liberty and freedom," said Weisinger, whose great-grandparents met Lady Liberty's gaze as they passed through Ellis Island from Eastern Europe.

Reasons vary for why the crown has been closed for so long, and there are questions about the role terrorism played in that.

After terrorists leveled the World Trade Center just across New York Harbor, the statue was closed to visitors until 2004, when the base, pedestal and outdoor observation deck reopened.

In May, the Obama administration announced that the crown would once again welcome visitors, albeit cautiously. Starting Saturday, only 30 people an hour will be allowed into the crown, and they will be brought up in groups of 10, guided by park rangers along the way.

New handrails have been installed to help with the climb. Bags, both big and small, are not allowed. Only cameras and cell phones are acceptable.

The National Park Service says the crown remained closed since Sept. 11 because the narrow, double-helix staircases could not be safely evacuated in an emergency and didn't comply with fire and building codes. Tourists often suffered heat exhaustion, shortness of breath, panic attacks, claustrophobia and fear of heights, spokesman Darren Boch said.

Rep. Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y., has pushed for years for the crown to be reopened, once calling the decision to close it off "a partial victory for terrorists." He said for it to be off limits for so long was an embarrassment.

"I've always said this was as much a failure of creativity as it was a failure of courage," Weiner

said. "I just think they couldn't figure out basic things like limiting the number of people, for example, or limiting whether they can carry a bag with them."

"It's such a great experience for all the reasons why the National Park Service wanted us not to have it. It's great because it is cramped. It's great because it is hot. It's great because it's an adventure."

Boch insisted that fear of a terrorist attack was not the primary reason why the crown remained closed. The statue's designer, Frederic Auguste Bartholdi, never intended for visitors to ascend to the crown, he said.

"We had actually looked at closing the crown even before 9/11, for the safety of visitors and protection of the resource itself," Boch said.

The \$15 tickets to the crown went on sale June 13, and tickets for the July Fourth weekend sold out within hours. Four of those tickets went to Weisinger, whose girlfriend's parents are also immigrants.

"We're both in a situation where our parents and great-grandparents put in so much work for us to be able to live the lives that we do," he said.

So far, about 14,500 tickets to the crown have been sold, most of them for visits through the end of August. Tickets currently on sale are for visits in the fall and beyond.

Recent visitors to Liberty Island fondly remembered previous trips to the crown and looked forward to getting up there again.

Victor Smith, of Vicksburg, Miss., hadn't been back to the statue since he was 12. The 66-year-old recalled climbing the long spiral staircase with his brother and father.

"My older brother was 14 and we like to run him to death going up the stairs, but it was fun," Smith said.

Not everyone was so enthusiastic.

"I thought it was overrated even as a kid," said Christine Lancelot, a 26-year-old park ranger on Liberty Island and a native New Yorker. "Personally, I'm not a big fan of a spiral staircase. It's very tight, it's very narrow, it's dark, you're not paying attention to what's going on around you because your concern is, 'Oh, my god, let me up to the crown, please!'" ■

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