

## Protect and defend our OFWs

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Last week, I accompanied the US-Philippines Society (USPS) to a meeting at Malacañang with President Duterte. Toward the end of the meeting, the president became visibly emotional when he started to talk about overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), in particular Joanna Demafelis, the domestic helper who went missing in Kuwait for over a year and was found stuffed in a food freezer at the abandoned apartment of her employers.

The president was very emotional about the plight of our OFWs, prompting USPS co-chairman Ambassador John Negroponte to comment that President Duterte was obviously very sincere in his concern for abused overseas Filipino workers. Those who get to see the president up close are left with no doubt that he really has one thing in mind, and that is to seek the welfare of the Filipino, especially those who have very little in life, like those who are compelled to work in other countries just to provide for their families.

He has repeatedly said that he owes his presidency to no one except the marginalized and the OFWs. During the 2016 campaign, OFW groups mobilized and used their own resources to produce campaign materials when they heard that the then-Davao City mayor did not have enough funds to mount a massive campaign. The overseas workers even gave marching orders to their family members to vote for Duterte and convince friends to do the same.

Obviously, they saw in the Davao mayor the kind of leader who could act on their concerns, someone who could empathize with the sentiment of these "little people" who felt that they have been neglected all those years by the government. An example was the "tanim bala" scam by unscrupulous airport personnel who would plant a bullet or two in the luggage of travelers, which became so prevalent in 2015.

Departing OFWs were easy targets because they would just end up paying to avoid charges and leave the country without any hassle or delay to avoid losing their jobs. Duterte was so incensed that he demanded action from then-president Noynoy Aquino, saying that he will make those involved in the scam "eat" the bullets.

To many of the OFWs – like the one I talked with – Duterte is "our hero because he is for us and is protecting us."

Overseas workers have been dubbed as our "modern day heroes" because of their remittances that have been keeping the economy of this country afloat for years, but at a very high price: Social dislocation for their families and potential abuse by their overseas employers.

According to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, OFW remittances reached a record high \$28.1 billion in

2017, 4.3 percent higher than the \$26.9 billion in 2016.

Many Filipino workers endure the pain of separation from their families, and many of them suffer from harsh working conditions and are subjected to all kinds of abuses by cruel and sadistic employers.

We have heard so many horrific stories about the inhuman treatment of female domestic workers who are beaten up and sexually abused, like this woman who was raped by her employer, with his father and brother also taking turns. In 2013, a household worker in Kuwait escaped from a female employer who threw boiling water on her to wake her up. The poor woman was able to come home, but she would forever be reminded of her nightmarish ordeal because of the deep scars and burn marks on her back.

Early this year, the body of Liezl Hukdong arrived from Kuwait. Her employer claimed that she committed suicide and hanged herself – but when the family saw her cadaver, they were shocked to see contusions and bruises all over her body. But the most gruesome of all was that she had been cut from the lower lip to her navel, and that her eyes, brain, tongue, lungs and kidney are missing.

"What sin did my countrymen commit? What have we done to you to deserve this kind of treatment?" the president asked, even as he appealed to Kuwait and other middle eastern countries to treat Filipinos as "human beings with dignity."

Reports indicate that Joanna Demafelis was tortured and most likely strangled, but that she was still alive, albeit unconscious – when she was put in the freezer. Her employers who are the principal suspects have been arrested, and it is clear that the president wants to see this case push through and for justice to be served.

There is absolutely no doubt, the president is on the right track in suspending any new deployments to Kuwait and possibly in other countries where Filipino workers suffer from, in the words of the president, "brutal treatment and human degradation." He announced that an audit is being conducted to determine the places where reports about abuses are prevalent.

While the United States has many laws that protect the welfare of workers, I always tell the staff at our Embassy in Washington, D.C., especially during our planning session, that our first order of the day is to take care of our countrymen – including dual citizens.

One of the three pillars of our foreign policy is to protect the welfare of Filipinos overseas, especially our OFWs, and this could not be more evident under the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte who, by imposing the deployment ban, is showing that we will not compromise on the welfare and dignity of the Filipino.

Surely, even those on opposite sides of the political fence will agree that we have to protect and defend our OFWs – without any doubt.

OVERSEAS FILIPINO WORKERS