

# What price labor export?

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The conviction of the couple suspected of killing Filipino Joanna Demafelis comes as a hopeful development in the often tragic saga of overseas Filipino workers forced to put up with abuse and maltreatment to be able to send funds to loved ones at home. A Kuwaiti court has sentenced Lebanese Nader Essam Assaf and his Syrian wife Mouna Hassoun to death by hanging over the murder of Demafelis, whose body was found inside the freezer of the couple's abandoned apartment a year after she was reported missing.

The death sentence, according to Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III, shows the sincerity and commitment of the Kuwaiti government to bring justice to Demafelis' grieving kin.

It also illustrates how standing up for the rights and welfare of OFWs—making noise, provoking global outrage, putting in place a deployment ban in Kuwait—can reap results. Because, yes, the world is watching.

Still and all, and despite the fact that the Philippines is against capital punishment, the case needs to be pursued to its logical conclusion. The couple, sentenced in absentia and currently in separate custody in Lebanon and Syria, may still appeal their sentence once they return to Kuwait, after all.

Malacañang has announced that the ban on the deployment of OFWs to Kuwait remains in place. And rightly so, until the decent and humane treatment of OFWs in that Gulf state is assured.

Per Senior Deputy Executive Secretary Menardo Guevarra, the ban will be lifted only if Kuwait agrees to conditions set by the Philippines in the proposed memorandum of understanding between the two countries. Among the major provisions of the agreement are adequate sleeping hours, nutritious meals (not just leftovers), rest on holidays, and the right of workers to keep their passports.

The agreement also stipulates that employers allow OFWs to keep their cell phones, prohibits the transfer of workers from one employer to another without their consent or clearance from overseas labor offices, and bans employers with records of worker abuse from hiring workers.

What matters more is how the agreement could improve the treatment of OFWs in Kuwait, rather than the conviction of the suspects, Guevarra said.

An estimated 252,000 OFWs work in Kuwait, but thousands of them took the free flight home after the deployment ban was announced. Most of them recounted harrowing tales of physical and sexual abuse and all manner of humiliation and maltreatment.

Rights groups have expressed alarm over the plight of workers in the Gulf and other Arab countries, where migrant labor is regulated by a sponsorship system known as "kafala." The system ties migrant workers' visas to their employers, prohibiting workers from leaving or changing jobs without the employers' prior consent.

Apart from pushing the agreement, the government must also keep an active engagement not just with Kuwait but other host countries as well, Senate President Aquilino Pimentel III suggested. He said high-level talks and discussions could serve to maintain "the delicate balance between focusing on the rights and welfare of OFWs and respecting the host country's laws and culture."

In fact, lawmakers should train their sights on the big picture, at how Demafelis' case—and earlier, those of Sarah Balabagan and of Flor Contemplacion—resulted from the government's labor export policy. To be sure, OFW remittances (an estimated P203 billion in April-September

2016) prop up the economy, encourage consumption, and generate foreign exchange. But at what price?

Statistics show that more than half—or 53.6 percent—of the number of OFWs are women. At least 67 percent of these women belong to the 25-39 age group, which means that many of them left young children behind to be able to work abroad despite the risks inherent in ad hoc caring arrangements. (The case of the 10-year-old in Zamboanga City put in the care of her grandfather and eventually impregnated by him is instructive.)

Add to this the social costs of fragmented families, the loss of homegrown experts to foreign lands, the abuse of more OFWs ... and our remittance economy starts losing its shine.

Unless the government overhauls its labor export policy and focuses on generating jobs that would keep Filipinos gainfully employed at home in their most productive years, this country would always be at risk of enduring another Demafelis.