- Employment

More than 20,000 eyed as new Kuwait hires

The Philippine Star · 16 May 2018 · 7 · By MAYEN JAYMALIN – With Pia Lee-Brago, Marvin Sy

Groups of migrant workers and recruiters yesterday hailed the signing of the agreement with the Kuwaiti government to protect Filipino workers in the Gulf state, which Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III said was a result of teamwork of labor and foreign affairs officials.

Bello led the team of Philippine government officials who flew to Kuwait last May 8 to resolve the diplomatic row between the two countries and for the sealing of the memorandum of agreement on the protection of Filipino workers there.

Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano, for his part, hailed Special Assistant to the President Christopher Go for being behind the successful conclusion of the agreement with Kuwait.

Cayetano said Go, who he described as a "silent worker," played a crucial role.

He said Go regularly followed up on important matters and served as the direct line to the President.

Cayetano said presidential adviser on overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) Abdullah Mama-o also played a role in the signing of the agreement as special envoy to Kuwait.

Mama-o joined the team of Bello and presidential spokesman Harry Roque Jr. for urgent talks with Kuwaiti officials.

The meeting discussed the crisis between the two countries, as both sides reiterated their determination to work harder to enhance their historical bilateral relations.

Kuwait officials agreed to release the four Filipino drivers who were arrested last month for the rescue of distressed Filipino workers and allow nearly 600 undocumented Filipinos to return to the Philippines.

The diplomatic squabble started when videos showing Philippine embassy staff rescuing Filipino workers from their employers went viral.

The Kuwaiti government viewed the rescue operations as an affront to its sovereignty but the Philippines insisted that it was a "rightful exercise" of its duty to protect its citizens abroad.

As a result, the Kuwaiti government declared Philippine Ambassador Renato Villa persona non grata. Villa returned to Manila last week.

President Duterte initially announced the ban on the deployment of Filipino workers to Kuwait would be permanent and urged them to come home.

Malacañang later said Duterte's statements were taken out of context and the deployment ban could be reconsidered.

Lifting the ban

Bello said the lifting of the ban would benefit over 20,000 skilled Filipino workers who are expected to leave the country and work in Kuwait.

Bello said the deployment of many OFWs in Kuwait had been delayed because of the ban.

"So the lifting will really open a floodgate of Filipino workers going to Kuwait. Ï don't have the exact number since we have stopped the processing and deployment, but it could be more than 20,000 because we are talking of 3,000 to 5,000 a day leaving the country to work abroad," Bello said.

Bello said he expects the processing and deployment of skilled workers to Kuwait to resume within the week since he is already set to submit to President Duterte his recommendation for the partial lifting of the deployment ban.

"Ï will tell the President that I will lift the ban but only with respect to skilled workers and I will have to wait to see the effect of the agreement on the protection of (Filipino workers there) before I will recommend the lifting of ban on deployment of household service workers," he said.

With the approval of the President, Bello said he would issue the necessary administrative order for the resumption of the deployment of skilled workers to Kuwait.

According to Bello, he would rather allow deployment of skilled workers because there were no complaints from this category of workers, unlike household helpers.

There are about 262,000 Filipinos working in Kuwait and 60 percent of them or 170,000 are household helpers.

Bello said the government is focusing its efforts on protecting domestic helpers because of incidents of abuse and harassment, citing the case of Joanna Demafelis whose body was found stuffed inside a freezer in an abandoned apartment in Kuwait.

Bello said if the recently forged agreement with the Kuwaiti government proved to be effective in stopping cases of abuses and harassment, he would recommend the resumption of deployment of household helpers, probably after Ramadan.

According to Bello, the Kuwaiti officials have been very cordial during their negotiations for the signing of the agreement providing protection for Filipino workers.
“All the responses to our requests were positive, they agreed to release our diplomats involved in the rescue of Filipino workers,” Bello said.
They also requested for the issuance of exit visas to undocumented Filipinos who were unable to avail themselves of the amnesty program before the deadline last April.
“The Kuwaiti government did not only agree to issue the exit visas, they even pledged to shoulder the repatriation of the 600 workers,” Bello said.