Plight of overseas Filipino workers

Over the past few days, Filipinos were shocked to find out that an overseas worker in Kuwait has been maimed to death and put in a freezer for several months by her cruel employers. This prompted President Rodrigo Duterte to ban the sending of workers to that Middle East country until the Kuwaiti government has acted upon the death of the Filipino worker and sign a bilateral agreement that will ensure the protection of the Filipino workers in that country.

The President’s move was immediately implemented by the Department of Labor and Employment headed by Secretary Silvestre Bello, who earned the support of many workers and groups in the Philippines and abroad. As a result, thousands of workers have been repatriated and thousands more of the 200,000 Filipino workers in Kuwait are set to return home.

On the downside, the ban stopped hundreds of Filipinos already with new or extended contracts from leaving for Kuwait and now are appealing the Mr. Duterte to lift the ban or at least allow them to leave to fulfill their obligations in their contracts and earn money for their families. The President, however, has remained steadfast on his order to enforce the ban, and appealed to the workers that it would be for their own good that they stay in the country meanwhile until protection are assured from the Kuwaiti government. Mr. Duterte has also threatened to expand the ban to other countries in the Middle East and other regions where there are many cases of abuses committed against the Filipino workers.

The hapless Filipino workers are therefore in a bind. Incurring expenses and debts just to be able to work abroad but are now stopped to proceed to their destinations, their burden has worsened instead of eased. While these workers want to stay, there are no job opportunities with better pay that they can find in their own country. Perhaps, this should also be addressed by the government before imposing any deployment ban. With some 10 million Filipinos working abroad contributing about $28 billion to the Philippine economy, they should be given the benefit of the doubt and allowed to work abroad unless better work are offered them by the government and the private sector.
American woman’s racist rant

Filipinos and Filipino Americans gripe every time they encounter reports of people, mostly young men, being assaulted by Americans in the United States. The latest of such uncalled for rant was that of an American woman caught on video in a Daly City, California store which has since gone viral. Originally posted on Instagram in August, the video shows the elderly woman talking to Jenny and her husband Alfred, before asking them “you don’t want me talking Philippine?” The woman then goes on to accuse Filipinos and other ethnic minorities of “stealing our food, stealing our money, and stealing our jobs.” Despite Vela’s audible remark calling the harasser a ‘racist’, the older woman appeared unperturbed and later told Alfred to go back to the Philippines.

The mayor of Daly City, Jasty Manalo, who is a Filipino-American, has spoken out about the incident and criticized the continued existence of “anti-immigrant rhetoric” in the city which incidentally is known unofficially as “Filipinotown” due to its large number of Filipino-Americans residents. According to recent surveys, a third of the city’s population of more than 100,000 is of Filipino descent.

Overall, there are an estimated 4.5 million Filipinos and American Filipinos in the United States today earning some $50 billion to $60 billion annually through legal and decent work, indicating their contribution to the growth of this country. Filipinos were even among the first Asians to settle in California, Louisiana and other areas most composed of ship builders and fishermen brought from the Philippines to the American continent through the Spanish galleon ships which plied the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans for over two centuries. In modern times, Filipinos were among the first workers in the Hawaii and California farms and Alaska canneries and, therefore, contributed much to the growth of these states. The Filipinos in America were also among the first to answer the call of then US President Franklin Roosevelt to fight the enemies during the war, thus the first and second infantry battalions of Filipinos were born. There were also records to show that some Filipinos also fought during the Civil War.

For more than two decades, the Filipinos were US nationals when the Philippines was a colony of the United States. These Filipinos carried American passports and were free to enter and leave the United States and yet they were deprived of their rights and were, like the other people of color, highly discriminated upon. Famous Filipino writer and labor union organizer and workers’ rights activist Carlos Bulosan described this era in his book “America is in the Heart” in which he even said that “it was a crime to be a Filipino” back then despite being US nationals. But the Filipinos endured the hardships, difficulties, and discrimination and so many Filipinos today are successful in various fields in America.

The old woman in the Daly City store perhaps should be reminded of history and the big contribution of Filipinos to America. She should also be reminded of the following words of Carlos Bulosan in his famous book “America is in the Heart” — “America is not a land of one race or one class of men. We are not all Americans that have lived and suffered and known oppression and defeat, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea picker. America is not bound by geographical latitudes. America is not merely a land or an institution. America is in the hearts of men that thirsted for freedom; it is also in the eyes of men that are building a new world. America is a prophecy of a new society of men: of a system that knows no sorrow or strife or suffering. America is a warning to those who would try to falsify the ideas of free men. America is also the nameless, the homeless refugee, the hungry boy begging for a job and the black body dangling from a tree. America is the illiterate immigrant who is ashamed of the world of books and intellectual opportunities is closed to him. We are that nameless foreigners, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant, and that lynched black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate – We are America!"

Nonprofit HICAP explains Medicare

Turning 65? Over 65 and still employed but thinking of retiring in the near future? For folks of a certain age and situation, health care coverage is a priority. Or should be.

Every day, 10,000 people in the United States celebrate their 65th birthday, thus becoming eligible for Medicare, the federal health insurance system. But not everyone knows how to access the program launched in 1965 by the administration of President Lyndon Johnson that has contributed greatly to the longevity of Americans.

When to enroll? How to enroll? What is or is not covered? Is it free? How to pay for costs not covered by Medicare? Can Medicare be accessed outside the United States? Countless questions swirl in the minds of the eligible as they get closer to 65 or are contemplating retirement. For them, their families or their representatives, the private nonprofit Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy Program or HICAP (pronounced high-cap) exists.

HICAP guides Medicare beneficiaries in making choices for health care coverage. It is not a government agency nor is it affiliated with the insurance industry. Sponsored by the state through federal funds, the program is supported by state-registered volunteers at offices in every county in the U.S. Counselors provide free, unbiased, confidential information. They do not represent or endorse private firms or professionals nor do they sell or recommend health or insurance plans or medical equipment.

HICAP is the only private nonprofit authorized to discuss Medicare by the U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

In San Mateo County, HICAP is administered by Self-Help for the Elderly, a nonprofit multiservice agency headquartered in San Francisco. Like all HICAP programs, the San Mateo office, under the direction of program manager Christina Dimas-Kahn, provides the following services, always free and objective:

- One-on-one counseling by appointment in 24 sites in accessible locations from Daly City and Pacifica in the North County to South San Francisco, Foster City, San Mateo and Burlingame in Central County, San Bruno, South San Francisco, Half Moon Bay, and South San Francisco.
- Information & Assistance by telephone;
- Long-term care insurance counseling;
- Referrals to coordinating local and state agencies;
- Community Education through presentations before groups and participation in health, public and private fairs;
- Training for counselor registration with the California Department of Aging.

The program provides assistance and counseling in Tagalog, Spanish, Mandarin and Cantonese, German and Arabic.

Counselors and community presenters get continuing education to keep abreast of Medicare developments:

- Eligibility and enrollment periods to help clients avoid late penalties
- Medicare basic benefits and costs
- Supplemental coverage in the form of “Medigaps,” retiree plans and VA benefits
- Medicare prescription drug coverage through stand-alone plans or with Medicare Advantage (MA) plans
- MA plans including Health Maintenance Organizations
- Enrollment in low-income subsidy or extra help for Part D

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Killings of mayors, priests

Two days in a row, the lives of two mayors – Antonio Halili of Tanauan City, Batangas and Francis Bote of Gen. Tinio in Nueva Ecija – were snuffed out. Mayor Halili was killed by a sniper’s bullet while he and other officials were singing the national anthem while Mayor Bote was gunned down as he left the NIA offices in Cabanatuan City.

According to reports, at least 14 mayors and vice mayors have been killed during the Duterte administration and Justice Secretary Menardo Guevarra immediately ordered the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) to conduct a thorough probe on the deaths of at least the latest two victims.

The killings of the mayors came after the killings of priests, prosecutors and judges and other personalities, even in broad daylight and in busy places, making some to conclude that President Rodrigo Duterte’s anti-crime campaign is slowly becoming a failure as the criminals seem no longer afraid of the law enforcement authorities. Mr. Duterte himself has admitted he seemed helpless in the fight against drugs and crimes, so he hinted making a proclamation of national emergency throughout the land by way of pressing the campaign.

An anti-crime summit might be in order to address the situation. The participation of the people is also a must in the campaign. Peace and order is sine qua non to progress and development. So, the government should make the anti-crime campaign a priority.
Preparing for 2019 elections

Amidst the problems of rising inflation, soaring prices of prime commodities and gasoline and services, election fever is heating up in the Philippines as the deadline for the filing of certificates of candidacy has been set for October 1 to 5 for national, congressional, and local candidates. Proof of the heating election fever is the killing of many local officials and barangay leaders, most of whom are said to be aspiring for reelection or higher positions. Another proof is the frenzied selection by the major political parties of their senatorial and congressional candidates as well as the bets for provincial, city and municipal posts.

Pre-election positioning is also noticeable in radio and television advertising, especially by one Mindanao congressman eyeing to become a senator and a lady governor in the North who also wants to succeed her brother in the Senate. In Manila, pedicabs and jeepneys are seen covered with tarpaulins of candidates for mayor and vice mayor, including the possible tandem of reelectionist Mayor Joseph Estrada and his vice mayorality candidate, former congressman Amado Bagatsing. Possibly in violation of election rules, Mayor Estrada bombarded with more than a dozen tarpaulins the campus of the Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Maynila proclaiming what he claimed he has done, using the taxpayers’ money, for the city university, even as Manilans and visitors are complaining everyday of heaps of uncollected garbage in city streets. Tarpaulins are also visible in other cities in the country while the more zavy are all over the social media with their photos, videos, slogans, statements and even plans and programs.

Meantime, the Commission on Elections continue its preparations attending to the ballots and the registration of new voters, including overseas Filipinos, in the Comelec offices nationwide. Comelec wants to expand the registration sites to include the popular malls. The Comelec’s actions come amidst the assurance of President Duterte that the coming elections will be honest and credible. To ensure this, he has ordered that a limit to the number of bodyguards of politicians be reduced, among others. Earlier on, Mr. Duterte appointed the chairman and other commissioners of Comelec to fully constitute the body after the retirement of several commissioners. We support the initiative of the President but he and the Comelec cannot succeed without the full cooperation of all the candidates and the voters themselves. It behooves upon every citizen to be responsible voters for, after all, they people get the government that they deserve.
HONORING FILIPINO WAR VETERANS

Filipino veterans of World War II received recently US Congressional medals in recognition of their war exploits and sacrifices. At the Philippine Military Academy in Baguio City, 29 war veterans, some as old as 97, personally got their medals from no less than US Ambassador to the Philippines Sung Kim, accompanied by US and Philippine officials. Posthumous awards were made through relatives of the veterans who had died, one of whom was the famous soldier General Vicente Lim.

The Baguio awardees consisted actually of the second batch so honored in Philippine soil. The first batch consisted of 13 veterans who got their medals at a ceremony at the US Embassy in Manila. A third batch of awardees will get their medals on November 13 in Lingayen, Pangasinan, then to each province in the country where the veterans are located. Earlier in Washington DC, nine war veterans were also honored in ceremonies at the Philippine Embassy attended by US and Philippine officials, including Gen. Antonio Taguba who used to be the highest ranking Filipino in the US Armed Forces who spearheaded the campaign for the US Congress to award the US Congressional medal to the Filipino war veterans. The ceremonies in Baguio and Washington actually marked the first year anniversary of the awarding of the medal to the first recipients.

"The congressional gold medal is given to the Filipino war veterans in recognition of their dedicated service, and selfless sacrifice during the war," said US Ambassador Sung Kim during the ceremony at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA). "This declaration is awarded to an individual or unit who performed outstanding deed or act of service to the security, prosperity, and national interest of the United States," he added. The US ambassador also said that the Congressional gold medal is also the highest expression of national appreciation from the US Congress for the distinguished achievement and contribution of veterans. Shared experience fighting the Japanese during the World War II and defeating a post-war communist rebellion further cemented the "special relationship" between the two countries, Kim said.

The recognition of many Filipino war veterans through the US Congressional Gold Medal actually came in decades after they were virtually neglected by the US government. The veterans who had lived to get their medals and the relatives of those who had died earlier are more than happy about the recognition. Better late than never, they all agreed.