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**HARNESSING DIASPORA IN TIMES  
OF CRISIS: PHILIPPINE EXPERIENCE**

By

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Excellencies, Co-Panelist, delegates, good afternoon.

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of the Philippines, I wish to commend the IOM for organizing this ministerial conference on diaspora and for this opportunity for our country to share with you our experience in enabling, engaging and empowering our diaspora in times of crisis.

At the onset, I wish to express my country's appreciation for all the assistance that IOM has consistently provided us in our operations to assist Filipino migrants in distress. I also wish to take this opportunity to join the previous speakers in congratulating Ambassador Swing for being elected for a second term as Director General of IOM.

The Philippines has a long history of migration to other countries, mainly for economic and family reunification reasons<sup>1</sup>. The Philippines too has since recognized Filipino migrants' contributions to the country's development and has in fact long mainstreamed migration in the Philippine development agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Around 10% of the Philippine population are migrants abroad. In 2011 alone Philippine authorities reported that 1.6 million Filipinos left the country for temporary work abroad and 2,500 joined their families abroad and had become permanent migrants.

As you might have already heard in other forums as well as from my colleagues' earlier presentations, the Philippines has been often cited for its more advanced policies and programs on migration management. We had put in place systems and procedures that maximize the benefits of migration and minimize its negative social cost.

In the Philippines, there are now specialized agencies that cater to specific types of Philippine diaspora<sup>2</sup>. We had set up programs to facilitate diaspora social, political, and economic investments<sup>3</sup>. We also formulated policies and programs to transform potentially disastrous brain drain to a productive brain gain, and what Ambassador Swing called yesterday, brain bank<sup>4</sup>.

This did not happen overnight. In the last 40 to 50 years, the Philippine government consciously and painstakingly built its migration management infrastructure. The running thread that binds my country's efforts to engage, enable, and empower Filipino migrant is the desire to advance and protect the well-being of the Philippine diaspora. Our aim now is to lay the ground work both for return migration and to maximize the potentials for development of Philippine diaspora wherever they may be.

Through the years, Philippine migration has developed and evolved, and has a life of its own, without any prodding from the government. It is against this backdrop that our primary imperative now is to provide effective protection to Filipino migrants abroad especially those caught in crisis situations.

This is the task that falls squarely on the office that I currently head – the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers' Affairs at the Department of Foreign Affairs.

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<sup>2</sup> The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration and the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration are in charge of the regularly processed overseas workers. The Commission on Filipinos Overseas takes care of Filipino emigrants, including spouses of foreign nationals. The Department of Foreign Affairs – Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs takes care of Filipinos in distress abroad. The Inter Agency Committee Against Trafficking is in charge of curbing the scourge of trafficking in persons.

<sup>3</sup> Just recently, the Land Bank of the Philippines has set up a PHP 2 Billion loan facility for the overseas Filipino workers who wish to invest in the Philippines

<sup>4</sup> These programs include the "Balik Scientist" which allows foreign based Filipino highly skilled specialist to teach in Philippine universities, mentor budding scientists and specialist, or embark on community projects with local counterparts in the Philippines.

This afternoon, I wish to share with you our perspective on migrants in crisis, particularly Filipino migrants caught in crisis situations abroad and the significant role played by the Filipino diaspora.

A crisis can be caused by natural disasters or may arise from civil conflict. No matter what form it takes, a crisis needs to be addressed immediately or lives will be put at risk.

For the Philippines, this is the basic premise. This is also an imperative of social protection for our overseas countrymen. In the Philippines, social protection is not only mainstreamed in our policies, it is also deeply entrenched in our legal and social frameworks. My country not only recognizes, but more importantly, acts on the need to protect Filipinos overseas as they are more vulnerable especially in times of crisis<sup>5</sup>.

When a crisis hits a country, my government's primary concern is to get Filipinos working or residing in that country out of harm's way and ensure their safety. Just to illustrate this resolve, the Philippines had been able to rescue and repatriate some 4,304 overseas Filipino workers from Syria since the start of the crisis in that country in 2011. Almost all of the rescued and repatriated Filipinos were women household service workers. Our operations are ongoing. We will not stop until the last distressed Filipino in that area is taken out of harm's way.

How do we do this? We do this with 3 Ps –Preparedness, Partnership, and Political Will.

What is the key role played by diaspora? Filipino diaspora is an indispensable partner.

**Preparedness.** As a standard operating procedure, all Philippine Foreign Service posts abroad are mandated to formulate and regularly update its crisis contingency plan for the Filipinos working and residing in their respective areas of consular jurisdiction. These contingency plans

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<sup>5</sup> The Philippines recognizes also that in most cases, crisis affected states lack coherence and resources and are mainly preoccupied with addressing the crisis at hand and its adverse impact to its citizens. In times of crisis, protection and assistance to migrants are often insufficient and mismatched.

include, among others, diaspora mapping<sup>6</sup>, the command and control procedures and structures, evacuation route plans, and material and logistical resources requirements.

In addition, a coordination office is also established to facilitate the implementation of the contingency plans, especially if the evacuation and eventual repatriation of Filipinos caught in crisis situations would involve several Philippine diplomatic and consular posts<sup>7</sup>.

In the beginning of the last decade, the Philippine government established the Presidential Middle East Preparedness Committee in response to the turmoil in the Middle East region<sup>8</sup>. However, during the Arab Spring, an ad hoc inter agency task force was created to oversee rapid and mass evacuation and repatriation of overseas Filipinos especially in Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Several teams composed mainly of foreign affairs and labor personnel who had served in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were deployed to augment Philippine embassy personnel and to assist in the evacuation and repatriation of Filipinos affected by the crisis.

During the height of the Arab Spring, simultaneous crises emerged in other parts of the world. There was the Christchurch, New Zealand earthquake and the tsunami and the Fukushima nuclear leak in Japan.

It was during this time when the Philippine government saw the need to create the Overseas Preparedness and Response Team (OPRT).<sup>9</sup>The

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<sup>6</sup> In varying degree of details, contingency plans of Philippine Foreign Service Posts contain information on the Filipino community in their respective consular jurisdictions based on Philippine official records.

<sup>7</sup> The Philippines is one of the few countries in the world that explicitly declares that one of the three pillars of its foreign policy is the promotion and protection of the rights and welfare of Filipino nationals and the provision of assistance to nationals in distress abroad.

<sup>8</sup> The Middle East Preparedness Committee was headed by a Special Envoy directly reporting to the President. It was tasked to prepare the appropriate responses, formulate policies, and develop modes for coordination among relevant Philippine government agencies to address safety concerns of 1.4 Million overseas Filipinos in the Middle East. It was this Committee that coordinated and led the implementation of several evacuations and repatriations of Filipinos in the Middle East at that period, especially at the height of the crisis in Lebanon, Kuwait and Iraq.

<sup>9</sup> The Overseas Preparedness and Response Team (OPRT) was created in April 2011. The OPRT reports directly to our President through his Executive Secretary. Its task is to coordinate actions to ensure the safety of Filipinos who are caught in crisis situations abroad.

scope of operations included monitoring and ensuring the safety of Filipinos not just in the MENA region but all over the world. Serving as Secretariat and its Operation Center and database<sup>10</sup> of the OPRT is the office which I head at the Department of Foreign Affairs. The OPRT's operating arm are the Rapid Response Teams.<sup>11</sup>

**Partnership.** The Philippine government considers the Filipino diaspora as a strategic partner in implementing its policy to assist Filipino migrants caught in crisis situations.<sup>12</sup> They are considered valuable resources and responsible partners.

Involving Filipino communities abroad in times of crisis is one of the significant features in our diplomatic posts' contingency plans. Filipino community leaders in the area are encouraged to take part in the command and control procedures and structures of the contingency plans.

They are part of the "wardenship" system we implement wherein each Filipino community leader will have to take care of a number of Filipinos, by at least keeping them informed of the situation and the contingency plans laid out for Filipino nationals. These leaders and their respective organizations are considered the effective conduits of information and instructions that need to be disseminated to the Filipino community in times of crises.

The "wardenship" system connects Filipino migrants in the same location to each other and with the Philippine diplomatic and consular personnel. These pre-established networks help identify migrants who cannot, for various reasons, access diplomatic and consular services and information in times of crisis and facilitate their access to humanitarian and

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<sup>10</sup> In order to make it more effective and efficient, a new database of Filipinos abroad called "Overseas Filipinos Information System" (OFIS) will soon be launched. OFIS will integrate official Philippine immigration, labor deployment, and passport issuance records, among others, under one system for the purpose of locating and assisting them during crisis situation.

<sup>11</sup> The Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) are composed of crisis management experts from different agencies who have been specially trained and are ready to be deployed to crisis-hit areas to bring the Filipinos out of harm's way and to help in the safe movement of Filipinos, whether they are being evacuated or immediately repatriated from the crisis area. Using the RRT, since 2011, thousands of Filipinos have been safely repatriated to the Philippines from crisis hit countries.

<sup>12</sup> The Philippines values and had a long and fruitful partnership with the international organizations, like the IOM, and the UN agencies in responding to crises. However, for the purposes of this presentation, discussion on partnership will be confined to partnership with the Filipino diaspora.

other assistance offered by the Philippine government and by humanitarian organizations.

The warden system has proven to be very effective in our recent experience in providing assistance to distressed Filipino diaspora members in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Japan.

Table 1  
*Mass Repatriation in Times of Crisis (2011)*

COUNTRY	NO. of DISTRESSED FILIPINOS REPATRIATED
EGYPT	93
LIBYA	10,087
YEMEN	282
JAPAN	93

During our operation to repatriate thousands of Filipinos out of Libya during the first quarter of 2011, Philippine schools owned and operated by Filipino diaspora were transformed as temporary evacuation centers and converging areas. Doctors, nurses, and other Filipino medical personnel who chose to remain in Libya during the crisis served as volunteer medical officers for medically distressed Filipinos at the evacuation centers.

This phenomenon of Filipinos helping each other even across countries is a Filipino custom we call “bayanihan”. Translated loosely, it means communal unity doing communal work. This social practice enables Filipinos to reach out to other Filipinos especially during extraordinary circumstances.

**Political Will.** Perhaps the most critical of the three ingredients is political will. In order to implement the crisis intervention program, resources, human, financial and logistical, are needed. Without the political will to do it amidst competing priorities, no such resources will be mobilized. The reality is, despite the existence of legal and social frameworks for social protection, when the implementers do not have the political will, all these will come to naught.

In the case of the recently established Overseas Preparedness and Response Team (OPRT) our country's chief executive is on the driver's seat. OPRT reports directly to our President through his Executive Secretary and the formation of specific Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) and its deployment orders come directly from him.

I also wish to emphasize that our diplomatic and consular post remained open even at the height of crisis to provide assistance to distressed Philippine diaspora. Our embassy in Tripoli, Damascus, and Cairo remained open at the height of the crises in these countries, and in countries where we did not have resident diplomatic posts, we sent out consular teams in crisis stricken areas as what we did in Port Au Prince in Haiti, and in Aden in Yemen.

The aforementioned measures are among many mechanisms which allow the Philippine Government to engage, enable, and empower, the networks of Filipinos abroad as strategic stakeholders to facilitate assistance to Filipino migrants caught in crisis situation.

By engaging Filipinos overseas and ensuring their safety, they continue to be part of Philippine society, thus staying connected and making that connection stronger with fellow Filipinos abroad and at home.

Through this Ministerial Conference, I believe we can learn more to do more for all our diaspora. I also believe that further recognition of their contributions through their experiences and fields of expertise will enable all our nationals living abroad to give back to their home countries.

Thank you.