

Alma: A Woman to the Rescue



Upon returning home to the Philippines, Alma is presented with a Certificate of Commendation for rescuing more than 25 Filipino workers from conflict zones in Syria © Center for Migrant Advocacy

Alma Guiao, 35, emerged as an unexpected heroine in the siege of Homs during the devastating civil war in Syria.

In 2009, Alma left her home in Cebu and flew to Syria in the hope of finding greener pastures overseas. Initially entering as an undocumented Overseas Filipino Worker, she arrived in the country using a passport with another person's identity. Alma dutifully worked in the field of domestic care, looking after an elderly woman in the city of Homs in Western Syria.

Prior to the eruption of the civil war, Homs, the third largest city in Syria, was considered a major industrial center. It was a vibrant city with the country's largest oil refinery. In 2011, soon after the civil war erupted, it quickly became a ghost town tainted with bloodshed.

At the height of the armed conflict, Alma had no idea that she would be instrumental in saving the lives of fellow Filipinos trapped in the city.

"They called my cellphone and asked me to help them. I asked them to send me their

address so that we could reach them, then I called a taxi driver who I knew so that they could be brought to the Embassy,” she explains.

Alma began the amazing feat of taking several dangerous trips in and out of Homs and Latakia to escort fellow Filipinos to safety in the Philippine Embassy in Damascus. In order to avoid government checkpoints, Alma put to use her knowledge of alternate routes in the desert, traveling in the dead of the night.

“We looked for other routes in the desert. We would pass through those routes to avoid military checkpoints. We would also rescue early in the morning so that the guards would still be asleep,” she explained.

From October 2011 until March 2012, Alma successfully assisted over 25 Filipina workers out of the conflict zone, most of whom she had never even met before the rescue.

Aware of the risk of being captured and killed in every trip, Alma said that her sole motivation was to bring her ‘kababayans’ (fellow Filipinos) to safety. “They would be so pitiful if they were not able to escape...I thought, ‘This was all for my fellow Filipinos’. They were in need of help,” she said.

Alma came home to the Philippines in March 2012, welcomed as a heroine by her countrymen and lauded for her bravery and selflessness. Upon her return to the Philippines, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Overseas Workers’ Affairs presented Alma with a Certificate of Commendation for her amazing acts of bravery in saving kababayans workers from Syria.

In December of 2012, the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Philippines raised its Alert Level 4 over Syria, prompting the immediate repatriation of more than 1,600 workers from the conflict-stricken country. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Damascus provided the plane tickets for the Filipino workers.

Credit: Center for Migrant Advocacy