

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

PRESS BRIEFING OF PCO ASSISTANT SECRETARY WHENG HIDALGO OTIDA
WITH DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS UNDERSECRETARY EDUARDO DE VEGA
October 13, 2023 [12:21 P.M. – 12:54 P.M.]

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Magandang tanghali, Malacañang Press Corps, at welcome muli sa ating press briefing ngayong araw, October 13.

Sa sectoral meeting kahapon, nagbigay ng update ang Department of Foreign Affairs kay Pangulong Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. kaugnay ng pinakahuling kaganapan sa gulo sa Israel at ang kalagayan ng mga Pilipino na naapektuhan doon.

Alamin natin ang latest sa sitwasyon sa Israel, kasama natin ngayon si Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Eduardo De Vega.

Magandang tanghali, sir, kumusta na po ang ating mga kababayan sa Israel?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Magandang tanghali. Magandang tanghali sa inyong lahat.

So, tulad ng sinabi namin ‘no, well, the Philippine Embassy in Israel along with other embassies are working double-time, doing all they can to ensure the safety and protection of our kababayans including working on their repatriation. Right now, the situation in Israel is more stable, so our efforts are now concentrated on Gaza.

If you remember po, recently we announced that the number of who would like to be repatriated is around 70 and that there are 137 Filipino citizens in Gaza. Our embassy in Amman updated these figures – there’s less Filipino citizens in Gaza, 131 actually... 131. Some left already before, some time ago before this outbreak. So, it’s a 131 including three tourists.

Out of the 131, up to 92 now are asking for repatriation and that’s as of several hours ago – by now, baka umakyat na – so 92. Let’s say 92, that’s over 70% and not one has been repatriated yet because of the fact that the Gaza is under blockade, but we are working on it. We are working with our partners, the diplomatic partners ‘no to see if humanitarian corridor can be opened to allow people to exit through, obviously if not the border with Israel, through the Rafah border with Egypt.

As for our kababayans in Israel, there are already some who have indicated that they want to go home not because they were victimized by the war specifically but because indirectly, they lost a job or times are hard for them. For economic reasons therefore, obviously aggravated by this conflict.

So, there are at least 22 Filipinos in Israel who have indicated that they want to go home. The first batch at government's expense will be leaving on October 16; there are eight of them. There are eight of them leaving on October 16 paid for by the Department of Migrant Workers and OWWA. And as promised, once they arrived, they'll be given the proper assistance 'no, the usual reintegration and other assistance packages provided by the DMW and OWWA.

Now, there are reports that we have been repatriating those students, you may have heard of 300 plus students, agricultural students who are accounted for and that we've been repatriating them. Not exactly. There was a first batch which already arrived, about 68 I believe, if the number is right and they are not at our expense because these are upon the conclusion of their studies and they are leaving.

Right now, there are still flights out of Israel; El Al Airline is still operating. Other airlines apparently have closed their flights but there are flights. There are flights in and out of Israel but may we repeat our travel advisory: Best not to go to Israel now, at the current time.

In fact, we had a Zoom meeting last night with our embassies in Tel Aviv and in Amman and Cairo and our embassies in Tel Aviv right now are preparing in cases of need for evacuation although it's not likely. Of course, they're seeing about buses and all and they were told by a rental company that, *"No, we can't lend the bus because we are touring Filipino here."* There are Filipino tourists in Nazareth or in Galilee so... Of course, now the embassy in Amman is assisting our tourists, Filipino tourists in Israel who cannot leave in case their flights were not... via El Al to leave via Jordan. In fact, four have entered Jordan from Israel – four of these tourists.

So, the situation in Israel is not a big problem if it refers to the evacuation of nationals because the situation there is more stable and we're ready to repatriate them and we don't expect big numbers; it's our kababayans in Gaza, ganoon po. And obviously, Israel has indicated that they will undertake measures to eliminate Hamas. So, Gaza has been placed on voluntary—I'm sorry, on voluntary repatriation or Crisis Level 3.

And Israel is still on Alert Level 2 which is a non-deployment; and so is the West Bank which is the right side of the other... the second land portion of Palestine or the State of Palestine.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Okay, sir. So, ano pa po iyang latest ngayon, since this morning?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Yes, I forgot to inform you. You are aware that as of yesterday, there were two confirmed Filipino fatalities. I think the media, in fact it's already in the front page, knows the identities but I will still not divulge the names because it's already known – one man and one woman, it's known; and four missing including one for confirmation.

I regret to inform you that, yes, it is confirmed – there is a third Filipino casualty. A 49-year-old woman from Negros Occidental. Her family is aware, the President is aware and the Philippine

government of course is working with the family. The embassy in Israel is in touch with the sisters who are in Kuwait actually for the repatriation of the remains.

According to the embassy, three casualties and three more missing – three missing Filipinos still. However, it doesn't mean that there is no hope because as we said before, there were a lot more missing a week ago – ngayon paunti nang paunti. So possibly, these three will still show up 'no, we hope.

And now, we join the nation in extending our deepest sympathies to the relatives of the latest casualty who was also a caregiver. Yes. And of course, we thank also the Israelis for their assistance for our kababayans who need protection in Israel right now.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Eden Santos, NET 25.

EDEN SANTOS/NET 25: Usec, since tatlo na po iyong confirmed kasama po iyong 49-year-old woman from Negros Occidental and still three missing ano po? Mayroon kasing family po na napanood iyong kaniyang asawa sa video na kinukuha po ano o hinu-hostage – lalake po iyon. Kasama po ba iyon doon sa missing?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Opo. Hindi po siya isa sa mga tatlong casualties, nasa missing po.

EDEN SANTOS/NET 25: Ah, so nasa missing po. And until now, wala pa po tayong information kung nasaan po?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Wala pang balita. Wala po.

May I now go on the President's instructions for us, because we met with the President yesterday? He said that the immediate concern is repatriation but nobody right now can get in or out of Gaza so repatriation, of course, is not yet possible at this time. Unless the humanitarian corridors are opened. So, this is a diplomatic initiative, we're in touch with the governments in the region. Of course, the United Nations will hold a session today, the United Nations Security Council and we expect them to call for a humanitarian corridor to allow civilians to leave.

But once it is declared, once the opening is declared, we must be ready and in fact, we are getting ready. Our embassy in Cairo is sending a team to the border. And we are providing them funding to be able to rent the necessary transportation to bring them from the border to Cairo and to fly them to the Philippines, itong 92. According to our embassy in Amman which is in touch with them, the Filipinos in Gaza – and I myself know Gaza, I was stationed in Israel before – are very resilient. If they are told, meet here, they will; or if they're told, just show up at the border at this time, they will because it's only, utmost, 30 minutes from Gaza City and other parts of Gaza to the Egypt border. So, we will be ready.

The President also directed the Department of Foreign Affairs to contact countries and also through their embassies in Manila also to provide critical assistance in looking for Filipinos who are unaccounted for and to help the Philippines in getting them out of Gaza. At the same time, ASEAN countries have also approached us for help, at the same time, they offered help. For example, Indonesia is offering to help Filipinos who want to leave the West Bank. Well, they have no presence in Gaza obviously, but they have citizens in Gaza so they are asking our assistance. So, it's an international approach 'no.

The President also directed relevant agencies to prepare for, of course, the reintegration of the Filipinos when they come home which is a standard every time we repatriate Filipinos. And, of course, that includes the receipt of ayuda, of financial assistance.

About the need for permits to enter, of course, it's needed for Israel, to agree to a humanitarian corridor and is needed for Egypt to allow citizens to enter through their border, so we are also talking with our friends from Egypt about that so that our kababayans who want to be repatriated could be brought there.

And in the President's words, what is critical now is Gaza and let's keep exploring all possible exit options. You already know that he has met with the Israeli ambassador who has promised that no civilians are being targeted. Nevertheless, if Israel as they say, actually conducts an operation against Hamas targets, there will be civilians who will naturally be casualties. And we aim, hopefully, that no Filipinos will be among the casualties.

Let me give you a profile of the Filipinos in Gaza. So there's about 131 of them, not all are Filipina women married to Palestinians; some are their children or even grandchildren. So they are practically of Arab ethnicity. Now, the spouses of the Filipinos are Palestinians, we cannot guarantee what Israel or Egypt will decide. So it may be a difficult decision like what happened in Ukraine – if a Filipino woman will leave, she may need to leave her husband and go to the Philippines with their kids, but not with her husband. Same thing happened in Ukraine – some remained, some left.

So, that's something ... that's a reality 'no. Our concern, of course, is our kababayans. The embassy in Amman is also thinking about our kababayan, there are 70 of them in the West Bank. But nobody is interested there, not one of the Filipinos, sitenta, not one of the Filipinos there would be interested leaving because in part, well, they don't feel the violence from that area. All right, but there may be unrest because there will be protests, 'di iba, the usual rallies whenever there are skirmishes. So, they're just advised to take utmost precautions po.

So, ganoon po, iyon ang instructions ni President – work on the repatriation, talk with governments, make sure that those who return are given the proper ayuda. And time is of the essence, our embassy is already sending their team to the border.

Q: Clarification lang po, Usec. Iyon pong 22 Filipinos in Israel, hindi po iyon sa Gaza galing?

USEC. DE VEGA: No, hindi po, hindi po. Ito ay talagang mga OFWs sa Israel na nawalan na ng trabaho dahil—sabi ng embassy, iyong iba doon dahil hotel workers tapos nagsara iyong hotel dahil, hindi lang dahil sa crisis pero recently, dahil tense iyong situation or what, so wala na silang trabaho. So they've decided to just go home.

Q: So iyong 92 po, sa Gaza po iyon?

USEC. DE VEGA: Sa Gaza, na nagpaparinig na, nagpahiwatig na gusto nilang umuwi.

Q: Umuwi po, as long as makakuha tayo ng humanitarian corridor?

USEC. DE VEGA: Humanitarian corridor for them to exit through Egypt 'no, and of course, Egypt has to give their permits. Kasi, the same as, if you remember iyong sa Sudan, ganoon din. Pero dito po, iyong galing Khartoum sa Sudan, ilang oras iyon, maraming oras para makarating sa border ng Egypt tapos ang tagal nilang naghihintay doon para papasukin sila ng Egypt, from the border, ilang oras naman by bus pumuntang Cairo. This will be less kasi mas maliit ang distansiya rito 'no.

Ganoon pa man, pinapaabot na namin sa inyo, once they leave, there's no guarantee na pagdating sa border, baka hindi agad sila papasukin. They may also wait one day, two days, three days, tulad ng nangyari sa Sudan. So, we're counting on the UN—and, of course, there will not just be Filipinos; there will be other nationalities as well. Of course, we have to anticipate the possibility that what will be finally be decided is that only foreigners will be allowed out. But that's a lot of foreigners still 'no, not just Filipinos. So they'll be there. I'm sure the international community, the Red Cross, and other organizations will find the way to provide them food and all that in case they have to stay at the border while their papers are being processed.

However, inaayos na ng ating embassy sa Cairo at Amman iyong kanilang travel documents, ang kanilang passports or what. So they have the papers to be able to travel to the Philippines. The question is: Entry to Egypt, safe entry to Egypt. But we are working on that, in full accordance with the instruction of the President.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Maricel Halili, TV5.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: Sir, iyon pong nabanggit ninyo kanina, first batch po ng magri-repatriate sa Israel sa October 16. So kailan po iyong inaasahan natin na the remaining—?

USEC. DE VEGA: We don't expect it to take long because they're only 22, it's just a matter of getting them commercial tickets, commercial flights. So, I'm sure by the end of October, nakauwi na ang mga iyan and let's see if there will be more who will ask. Possibly, there's a full-scale war already, possibly there'll be more for understandable reasons, I might say, I better leave it.

But it's not that complicated for Israel because we could just book them commercial flights or drive them to Jordan. Of course, they'll need clearance as well. And then, from Jordan fly them home. So hindi po iyon ang problema; iyong sa Gaza.

MARICEL HALILI/TV5: Okay. Sir, iyon pong kanina na iyong third Filipino po na na-confirm na casualty, may we know kung ano po iyong naging cause ng death niya?

USEC. DE VEGA: No, I myself don't have the information. Just the embassy said that the morgue and the Jerusalem police confirmed. Okay, Filipino. Apparently, the landlady also—I'm sorry, not the landlady. The employer, I think, twitted it also, messaged it. Unlike iyong pangalawang namatay na Filipina, sabay iyong amo at saka siya iyong namatay.

Q: [OFF MIC]

USEC. DE VEGA: No, that's the second one. This is the third one, unfortunately. So, it's two women and one man.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Pia Gutierrez, ABS-CBN.

PIA GUTIERREZ/ABS-CBN: Sir, to confirm, iyong third Filipino fatality, ito po iyong kinu-confirm natin through DNA testing?

USEC. DE VEGA: Yes, DNA or other testing, yes, opo.

PIA GUTIERREZ/ABS-CBN: Tapos, sir, may monitoring na po ba tayo doon sa situation mismo ng mga Pilipino na nasa Gaza considering na may blockade nga po doon, mahirap iyong pagkain, iyong tubig, iyong kuryente?

USEC. DE VEGA: Yes, okay, they are good—well, paano ko sabihin ito? Ayaw kong sabihin na good news because it's not—'Di ba sinabi na Israel is blocking, not allowing electricity, water and so forth, kasi they're the ones... actually under the arrangements, Israel provides electricity, water, food kasi they—Although they withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005, they still control in effect the borders. So they are the ones allowing things to go in or out.

According to our embassy in Amman they still have electricity, water, et cetera but limited for a few hours a day. So, our embassy is in touch with them. They are not dying of hunger. They are not yet... they are not casualties of course – so, they are in touch.

Ang susunod of course is inform them 'when is the right time', I mean, it's possible to go to the border. If need be, if possible, we will also provide them with transportation from their cities in Gaza – it's not large (Gaza), at most it will take 30 minutes lang to the border but ang sabi ng ating ambassador, Filipinos... and we know this, we're resilient, we're resourceful, just tell them where to meet or where to go, they will arrive there. A question though, as the

President also said, “Papayag ba iyong ating mga kababayan na hindi kasama iyong kanilang mga asawa?”

Now, let’s first hope that eventually we’ll be able to have that humanitarian corridor. But we have to be ready, it could be anytime in the next few days or week maybe.

Q: Another question, sir, kasi nabanggit din po noong embassy sa Tel Aviv na medyo stable na iyong situation sa rest of Israel except na lang doon sa may southern part. Pero what prompted po the raising of the alert level from two to three?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: No, three is for Gaza. Alert Level Three is for Gaza, iyong voluntary repatriation; Israel is still two. We raised it two, meaning huwag munang mag-deploy, huwag munang magpadala ng workers.

May I clarify, Israel is two; Gaza is three and; the West Bank which is the other part of the state of Palestine is two.

Let me see – this is Israel. Between Egypt and Israel is the Gaza Strip; to the right of Israel beside Jordan is the West Bank. That’s the seat of the real Palestinian government.

May I clarify Hamas is not the government of Palestine, it is the government in Ramallah which is in the West Bank.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Alvin Baltazar, Radyo Pilipinas.

ALVIN BALTAZAR/RADYO PILIPINAS: Yes, sir, good afternoon po. Usec, ang concentration natin ngayon apparently is doon sa area ng Israel pero kumusta iyong mga kababayan naman natin doon sa Palestine, baka naman medyo mayroon din tayong baka madamay din doon. Anong hakbang ang ginagawa ng DFA para naman doon sa mga Pinoy sa Palestine?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Opo. Tulad ng sinabi ko po, mayroon tayong sitenta sa West Bank at nakikipag-ugnayan tayo sa kanila – they are not in danger because walang hostilities doon at saka the official Palestinian government is in favor of a diplomatic solution to their issues with Israel ‘no eventually a two-state solution. So, the 70 are fine. We’re talking about the 137 in Gaza. Iyong 137 sa Gaza where it’s controlled by the Hamas who have no intention to have peaceful relations with Israel – in fact they want state of Israel to disappear, to be eliminated, to be eradicated from the map.

Ang ginagawa ng ating embassy ngayon – dalawang embassies ang nagtatrabaho – iyong Cairo at saka iyong Amman. Our embassy in Jordan is the one in touch with them individually because they are the ones accredited as our representatives to the Palestinians. So, they are in touch with each one that’s why they were able to correct their numbers to 131 – hindi 137. And they were able to see, check that they still have food and water, electricity although it’s limited.

Ang ginagawa ng ating embassy sa Cairo – sila ang susundo sa kanila once makarating na sila sa border when the humanitarian corridor, hopefully, will be open or allowed and they will be brought home and then we'll have the reintegration, the usual programs of the government – iyong bigyan ng ayuda and so forth 'no. So, gastos po iyan ng pamahalaan, iyong transportation nila para makalabas ng Gaza papuntang Pilipinas. Unfortunately, we can't send them supplies kasi nga mayroong blockade but they are resilient, I mean they are already part of Gaza because they've long lived there, may asawa silang Palestinian. So our concern is their repatriation tulad ng sinabi ng Pangulo.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: So, sir, ano naman po iyong extra efforts na ginagawa ng pamahalaan ng embahada sa Israel para mahanap pa po itong tatlong missing?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Nakikipagpulong araw-araw iyong ating... I'm sure they are noticing the frequent calls of our government, of our embassy 'no. Of course, it's no laughing matter, I apologize 'no, mayroong three missing. Aside from them we are talking to, well, other governments kasi baka dinala sa iba't ibang bansa – see we are talking to governments in the region kasi hopefully either they are just hiding – ayaw magpakita or what, or if they were hostages they are somewhere – if not in Israel, somewhere maybe in Gaza and or brought to another country and we're talking to governments in the region. So, we'll spare no efforts, however, we hope of course we need prayers 'no also and that's why we reiterated that the President condemned to strongest possible terms what he called barbaric or inhuman terrorist attacks because it targeted civilians and that's a violation of international law.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Okay. Ivan Mayrina, GMA 7.

IVAN MAYRINA/GMA 7: Usec, what we know so far about the third fatality is that she's a woman from Negros Occidental, also a caregiver. Would we know if she died on the day of the attack on Saturday morning or also in the area of Kibbutz?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: She died in the area of Kibbutz. On the day of the attack, she was at... We're not sure if she was a caregiver there in the south but there was a music festival there and there were a lot of people who were killed attending that music festival which was usually held during the Sukkot which is an Israeli holiday. And what we understand she was one of the attendees and a lot of people died there.

By the way, why do you need testing, why do you need time – unfortunately, a lot of the bodies of those who were killed were mutilated or burned or so. So, that's why it's taking time to determine and so forth. So, I'm not sure, I can't confirm that she was a caregiver from the south but that she was there attending a music festival which was subject of an attack by the Hamas.

IVAN MAYRINA/GMA 7: And has the President communicated with the family of the third fatality?

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: No, because the President... because it's very recent news, the President knows about it, he will contact the family of course. Literally within the last hour or so that the President knew although news reaches us from the embassy a little earlier this morning although I must say I note that some legislators are already aware of it, so they have their sources perhaps.

IVAN MAYRINA/GMA 7: Thank you, Usec.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: No more questions? Jinky Baticados, IBC 13. May pahabol, sir.

JINKY BATICADOS/IBC 13: Sir, sorry. Actually for the record lang naman po ito, sir, para lang po mabura iyong minsan kasi may mga pamilya dito iyong mga OFWs na nandoon, naiipit sa gulo minsan sasabihin nila "Ano ba, kailan pa kayo..." Minsan kasi, sir, nabi-blame po iyong mga ahensiya ng gobyerno natin na sabi nila walang ginagawa, ano pa ang hinihintay ninyo, bakit hindi pa i-repatriate or wala pang mandatory repatriation. So, para lang po sa kaalaman ng lahat, bakit po tayo kailan ipinapatupad ang mandatory repatriation versus po dito sa tinitingnan natin na talagang hinihintay muna natin na magpa-repatriate ang mga kababayan natin, sir.

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: First of all, hindi pa sinalakay iyong Gaza – so, it's voluntary. Kasi maaaring hindi sasalakayin ang Gaza. Pero once pumasok na tapos, well, state of war kailangan mandatory na; pangalawa, walang ginagawa ang pamahalaan because precisely... well, may inuuwi na tayo. In fact, may inuwi na tayong mga Filipino 'no at saka even in case when they're able to ride their planes or go to Jordan – that's also effort ng pamahalaan. Our ambassador is going there or his team is going there.

May I say something about Ambassador Ezzedin Tago, our Ambassador in Egypt. He was the same ambassador who rescued a lot of Filipinos from Sudan on the first day or second day that there was war and there were Filipinos arriving at the border. He had to rush to the border in a car many hours. His car turned turtle and yet he still proceeded after he recovered; he proceeded; his Vice Consul went to the hospital. After day pati iyong Vice Consul Bojer Capati pumunta sa border – that is the Philippine foreign service for you. I'm not surprised they did that because that is our service to the nation. And why do they do things heroically? Because they serve our heroes overseas. Salamat po.

PCO ASEC. OTIDA: Okay. If there are no more questions that concludes our press briefing today. Thank you so much, Usec. Ed de Vega and thank you, Malacañang Press Corps. Good afternoon.

DFA USEC. DE VEGA: Good afternoon.

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