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DIR. CRIS VILLONCO WITH DEPARTMENT OF MIGRANT WORKERS
SEC. HANS LEO CACDAC
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PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Current developments, presidential directives, accurate and reliable updates straight from the Palace. Sitting-in for Daphne Oseña-Paez, this is Cris Villonco for Malacañang Insider.

“Protect OFWs and their families” – President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.’s marching order is to empower Filipino migrant workers, protect their rights and promote their welfare, kasama rin dito ang pagbibigay ng mga serbisyo at programa para mapabuti ang buhay ng ating mga makabagong bayani at kanilang mga pamilya.

And to talk more about that, we have with us today Department of Migrant Workers Secretary Hans Leo Cacdac. Good day, sir. Thank you so much.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Good day, Cris. Glad to be here.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Wonderful to see you in this kind of setting since magkasama naman po tayo minsan sa Filipino community event.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, of course.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: And you always address our OFWs so lovingly.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, of course. Always an honor to be there and with our OFW President; overwhelming mandate from OFWs for our President in the last election.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes, of course. So to work together in developing skills of healthcare workers, let’s discuss that. Recently, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Singapore and the Philippines on the recruitment of Filipino health workers. What’s next after this?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: First of all, this could be, perhaps, the first bilateral labor agreement signed between the Philippines and Singapore. Usually, it would be on the level of ASEAN multilateral or regional arrangement, so that’s a milestone in itself.

The agreement, essentially, is a measure of protection for our Filipino health workers in Singapore. They’re already amply protected, but this one heightens the protection, ensure fair, ethical and sustainable recruitment for our OFW nurses. There are mutual interest measures such as exchange of experiences and knowledge transfers, and scholarships in store for budding nurses who would wish to, perhaps work in Singapore—well, work here and then work in Singapore. There is a guarantee of just, fair and commensurate compensation – very, very important. Fair treatment, as it is called, of nurses in Singapore, meaning, our nurses will be paid

similar to their Singaporean nurse counterparts. So there will be no discrimination in that sense. And also, there are measures to effectively reintegrate our nurses.

So, all told, it's a measure of protection, of safer labor mobility for our nurses, for the mutual interest of both sides – mutual interest of the Singaporean health system, as well as the Philippine health system and the Philippine economy.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So how does the MOU between the Philippines and Singapore specifically aim to address healthcare workforce shortages in Singapore? And what role will Filipino healthcare workers play in filling these gaps?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, that's a very important point. The President always, amongst government officials and agencies and with the private sector, has always emphasized that today's bilateral labor relation especially with healthcare workers should not just entail the rights-based approach in terms of protecting the rights of workers, but look at developmental market development measures such as ensuring that there will be no dearth of nurses here for our very own healthcare system. As we know from the COVID days, COVID years, that we really, really need healthcare workers.

So there are measures to strengthen our labor market in terms of healthcare workers that is why measure such scholarships and measure such as partnerships between institutions whether healthcare or medical or healthcare educational institutions are in store. After this agreement, there will also be a counterpart agreement with Sec. Ted Herbosa and the Singaporean side, the Singaporean Health Minister along this line as well.

So it's not just ensuring fair, safe labor mobility, but also ensuring, what you had mentioned, the development of our own talent pool/talent base so that our healthcare system is spoken for in terms of our healthcare needs.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So how the MOU impact the recruitment process?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Well, in terms of impacting the recruitment process, impacting it for the better. Already, we have a very steady stream of OFWs on a yearly basis, not as much volume as, let's say, in the Middle East or in Saudi Arabia to Singapore. But still, we know for sure that the systems can be enhanced.

So when we say, fair, ethical and sustainable recruitment, we mean to say that which ensures that nobody will be victimized with substandard contracts; nobody will be victimized by illegal recruiters and illegal job offers; nobody will be victimized by payment of exorbitant legal fees or recruitment fees.

So added protection and, of course, the other important dimension to all this – the cooperation of both sides in terms of measures to address complaints or grievances of nurses onsite. So we have a labor attaché and an embassy in Singapore, of course, working hand in hand with the DFA, but more so, working hand in hand with the Singaporean health and manpower ministries. So that if a worker needs help, needs protection, needs to have an issue addressed, then there's somebody there to listen to him or to her.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So paano po ito makakatulong, the collaboration na ito sa ilalim ng MOU sa pag-unlad ng healthcare sa Singapore and, of course, dito rin po sa Pilipinas?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, I think mula sa COVID, we've already learned na napakahalaga ng healthcare workers. And in a moment of crisis, there could be a dearth or an absence of healthcare workers or lack of healthcare workers. So it's very important that there is, first and foremost, a secure, a stable labor market here for healthcare workers, that our healthcare education institutions graduate and trained healthcare workers in sufficient basis, that our healthcare workers are held up to a world-class standard. And that is why it is important also for our OFW nurses to give back, to reintegrate. There are talks, for instance, on how long-time nurses in Singapore could be able to teach here in nursing schools where a master's degree could be required; so for OFW nurses in Singapore, to obtain master's degree while they're there or when they come back so that they're able to teach whatever they learned abroad. So all of these things are in store.

For us, what's very important is we make sure, once again, based on the President's directive, that this is not just strictly a recruitment agreement but also an agreement that will ensure safe recruitment, ethical recruitment, but giving back to our economy and our labor market ensuring that our own healthcare world labor market is sufficient enough to sustain our healthcare system.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: And what about the benefits, let's say, of our OFW healthcare workers in Singapore? Is there also going to be training and development in that aspect?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, definitely. We have a world-class healthcare institutions and hospitals in Singapore similar to our system here, so definitely there will be training in store for them. And that is why it's important also that the nurses who are trained there are also adequately trained here so that there is a sense of matching and recognition of the learning, of the degree, of the training that our nurses here obtained. And so that whatever they've learned here will be recognized when they go to Singapore, and they will be hired in accordance with their stature, with their level, with their experience that they had obtained here. And, of course, as you mentioned, if they are trained there, in turn, that training will also be brought back here so that whatever the OFW nurse learned there will be cascaded to our very own nurses.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: It's their very own sense of giving back.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, exactly.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: That's really wonderful to know. I think we know that the Filipino healthcare workers are really, not just in Singapore, I mean, we are recognized globally as experts in healthcare. And not just with the commitment and the dedication but the passion and the actual care that they have for their patients. So I'm pretty sure there will be more coming, we will be expecting more.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: But for this one, in particular, ano po ba iyong dapat ma-expect ng ating mga OFWs kaugnay sa MOU na ito?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Ang sa akin ay mas mayroong kasiguruhan na safe and fair ang labor recruitment process. Kaya't kapag sinabi namin, "Please deal only with licensed recruiters, those recruiters licensed by the DMW, then we mean to say that these are licensed recruiters that with the responsibility and accountability to protect the workers, so they are safe in that sense. So we assured because we know that we also have counterparts, Singaporean support from the other side.

So, and the other thing is, there will be adequate, as you mentioned, there will be adequate recognition of whatever credentials or possible training credits that they've obtained here, we will take this up definitely with the Singaporean counterparts. As I said Sec. Ted Herbosa is onboard, we're also talking to Chair De Vera and the CHED in charge of medical educational institutions. So, there will also be an adequate, should I, say discussion toward the recognition of credentials and training and learning of OFW here. And then as I mentioned, lastly, there were integration side.

While they are there, we will provide them with all the information in terms of an outlook or a path toward the future. The President, every time he go abroad, right, always invites our Filipino communities to come back and appreciate the improvement and the strengthening of our economy by the President's economic team.

So, we will also be mindful of offering livelihood, business, employment opportunities here so that our nurses can look toward a future where they go back, not just for themselves but also their families. Because it's possible, for instance for a nurse, to have a child or relative who is not necessarily in health care but made venture into business and other endeavors. So, we'll open up all these things; we partnered for instance with Sec. Kiko and Sec. Frasco in agriculture and tourism for those willing or interested in entering into agriculture tourism-related businesses.

So, all of these will be brought to the fore. We're talking to all the relevant agencies now in a package that can be presented to OFWs – not just the nurses abroad but everybody else in terms of the business and employment, economic outlook in our country – so they come back as the President has so invited them to do so.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes, it's wonderful that all the agencies and departments are coming together to make this possible, all under the presidential directive.

So, we will return and when we return, we look at how the Department of Migrant Workers deliver services and programs to improve the lives of our modern-day heroes – this and more, only here at Malacañang Insider.

[COMMERCIAL BREAK]

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: You're still watching Malacañang Insider with Secretary Hans Leo Cacdac.

Isa sa mga primary directives ni Pangulong Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. ay masiguro ang kaligtasan at kapakanan ng mga OFWs. On war or conflicts, with recent escalating tensions from ongoing conflict between Iran-backed Lebanese paramilitary group Hezbollah and Israeli military, what are the latest updates on this?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Well, yeah. The conflict, of course, emerged on October 7th last year when Hamas entered the territory of the State of Israel and, well, there was a conflict – there were killings and, of course, Israel retaliated. Hezbollah in Lebanon has also been engaged in conflict with the Israeli defense forces, and the recent reports say that the situation is tensed and could possibly worsen.

So over the weekend, the Philippine Ambassador to Beirut issued an advisory asking Filipinos there to be repatriated, to come home. Since October last year, the President has already directed

us to open up the lines of communication as well as our repatriation services. So, we've been delivering free repatriation services and onsite monitoring for the protection of OFWs; and in Lebanon, there've been around 356 returnees.

In fact, there was a group of 15 who arrived over the weekend. But there is another group of 45 that is set to arrive possibly later this week and are going through immigration authorities in Lebanon. Around a thousand had applied but 45 said they are ready to go home.

We continue to monitor the situation. There are crisis plans that are in place and ready to be implemented should the situation worsen. But for now, the call is for our workers to come home. Its Alert Level 3 imposed by the DFA in Lebanon which means it's second to the highest. There is an absolute ban on deployment of workers there and also voluntary repatriation, hence, the announcement of the Ambassador over the weekend.

We also have a shelter prepared already because the strategy is in-country evacuation prior to eventual repatriation. So, we stand ready as directed by the President. Not just there, but even here – we will receive them in a whole-of-government team designated by the President to do so.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, can we have... iyong panawagan po sa mga OFWs sa Lebanon na nais umuwi sa bansa. Saan ba sila puwedeng magpunta o tumawag?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes. Mayroon tayong hotlines na inanunsiyo, iyong ating ambassador/embahada sa Beirut. But for here, for DMW-OWWA, the hotline is simply 1348. If outside the country, it's (+63) 21348 but that hotline shared/co-shared by Admin Arnell Ignacio and the OWWA would be enough for the relatives, the loved ones of our OFWs in Lebanon and the OFWs themselves to state their issues, their requests and we will respond accordingly.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, please tandaan po natin iyan – 1348...

DMW SEC. CACDAC: 1348 is the hotline here.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: That's for here, and then if you are abroad, it's (+63) 21348.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes. And there are other specific hotlines mentioned by the embassy in Beirut so I would suggest to please look up the hotlines announced in their Facebook page and we also have our own Lebanon help desk at the DMW. So, we have a team there meant to help those in need.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes. I would like to commend your department and also as well as OWWA for constantly updating your social media pages and I can see that there are so many people who respond for help and everything else. But, of course, there's always the concern about families. So, paano po ba mai-assure ang mga kaanak o pamilya ng mga OFWs dito sa Pilipinas na wala silang dapat ikabahala sa kaligtasan ng kanilang mahal sa buhay sa Lebanon?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes. Ang assurance po natin, tutulungan po natin kayong lahat – iyan ang utos ng ating mahal na Pangulo na bigyan kayo ng sapat na proteksiyon at isaayos ang inyong welfare and well-being lalo na diyan sa Lebanon. So, mayroon tayong labor attaché in Beirut and he is right now in the process of communicating together with the Ambassador, communicating with the Filipino communities there – 11,360 OFWs in Lebanon, most of them in the central part in Beirut.

The conflict, right now, we know is that the southern border. Northern Israel and southern Lebanon, no Filipinos are there – they’ve been evacuated. However, there are still some southern cities with some Filipinos there so we’re in direct contact with them.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: So, aside from everything that is being done by both parties actually to bring them home, to bring the OFWs home, ano po ba iyong mga maibibigay na assistance sa pag-uwi nila, ng mga OFWs dito sa Pilipinas?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Oh, that’s a very good question because I said the President, right from the get go last October, met with all the relevant agencies, met us all and directed us to come together in a whole-of-government approach in terms of assisting returning workers.

The help extended to returning workers especially in war-torn areas such Lebanon, and with the start of war in Israel is unprecedented. We provide financial assistance – it used to be 50,000 from DMW and 50,000 on the OWWA side but last week the President asked us to review the rates and so we increased from 50 to 75 each – so, it would be a 150,000 from DMW-OWWA for returning OFWs from Lebanon; and there will be assistance also, since it’s whole-of-government, Sec. Ted Herbosa and his DOH team are there to provide immediate medical checkups including psychosocial counseling; Sec. Rex Gatchalian and the DSWD are there to provide financial assistance and livelihood assistance; and TESDA then DG Mangudadatu and now DG Benitez are providing...well, they are sort of vouchers where the returning OFW can choose the training program, skills upgrading program they would wish to enter into including the institution for free; and with that, the DMW-OWWA does also provide livelihood assistance; and as I said, DA and the DOT are there as well.

So, the options are all laid before our returning workers so it’s up to the worker. Mayroon ding entrepreneurship training provided by DTI. So, if they are not yet secure enough or at least not prepared to enter into business, we can also put forward training programs for them.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay. Let’s talk about this as a whole, the Department of Migrant Workers. How are the DMW’s current programs addressing the challenges faced by OFWs such as illegal recruitment, exploitation in line with the President’s mandate?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: We have a robust anti-illegal recruitment and anti-human trafficking program right now. We had just recently our 13th establishment closure – we shutdown illegal recruitment establishments. To give you an idea, last year, it was seven for the entire year, so we have 13 this August – so, we’re braced to double our efforts; we also have convictions in regular regional trial courts.

Recently, we retained our Tier 1 US State Department ranking in the anti-trafficking in person effort. It’s the eighth consecutive year but we retained our Tier 1 standing just recently – which means, we are doing well, higher than the global standard in terms of fighting/combating illegal recruitment and human trafficking.

So, the effort goes on. Online, we’ve taken down around 30,000 or so Facebook online illegal job offers and similar number in TikTok. We were the first to be allowed to do so in both Facebook and TikTok to engage in takedowns of what we perceived to be illegal recruitment sites.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: And these takedowns are very quick and efficient.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, very quick and efficient and we're thankful to both Facebook and TikTok. And the effort continues, I mean, we will not rest because there will still be those who will attempt to recruit illegally kaya't ang payo namin, kapag online ang recruitment – of you doubt a person recruiting you face-to-face then all the more will you doubt a person recruiting you online – so, that's our basic piece of advice, among other pieces of advice to fight illegal recruitment.

Let me throw in one more, when there is no work visa shown; when there is no license from DMW shown by the recruiter; when it is recruitment done not in an office, confines of an office but in a public place like a mall, or a park or what you have you – then all of these are badges of illegal recruitment. Because a legal recruiter will have a license; will ensure that everybody leaves with a work visa; and will have an office displaying prominently their DMW recruitment license number.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: And usually po on social media, what are the giveaways for fake recruiters assuming they're like there's not much information?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: The giveaway, well first of all, it's basic that when one recruits online there's already something wrong there because somebody is hiding under the shadows and would not want to be recognized or identified.

A fairly common online illegal recruitment perpetrator would have a common name you know, a common name that is similar to thousands and hundreds of thousands – so, it's very difficult to search for that person online; another one is asking money upfront is a very, very distinct badge of illegal recruitment. Somebody who will say “Oh, bilis magbayad ka na isa na lang ang ticket, isa na lang ang upuan sa eroplano. Isasara na iyong offer. Bukas wala na ito, magbayad ka na ng 20, 30, 40, 50 up to 100,000 even more – so, that's another badge of illegal recruitment. Somebody online lurking in the shadows, ayaw magpakilala, generic ang pangalan, sometimes fake pa iyong profile picture.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Yes, sometimes kinukuha pa nila sa iyong mga ibang legal.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes. Real people or celebrities and then iyon nga nagpi-pressure na bayaran siya upfront.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Okay, sir. President Marcos Jr. vows to boost retraining programs for returning OFW. What measures are being implemented by the DMW to enhance skills training and job matching to reintegrate them into the local workforce?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes. We're fully onboard with the President's directive. The TESDA is the main government agency there and we recently signed a partnership agreement with TESDA. First, there will be direct referrals similar to the returnees from war-torn areas to the TESDA so that they have direct access to free retraining or training upon arrival or skills upgrading of OFWs. They will choose the course they want to take – automotive; welding; caregiving and all those other courses and the institutions. If they live in the provinces and there is a training institution there that they are familiar with they can very well choose that and it's all for free.

The second one is recognition of skills sets that OFWs already have. That's why we're partnering with TESDA in terms of accrediting or should I say assessing the skills. No more training but they can be assessed in terms of for instance a long standing let's say a cook in a restaurant in Dubai would have sufficient skills sets but never went through formal training but is world-class, it can happen. So, the TESDA goes over there and assesses the skills of that person and provides a certification of the skills of the workers – so, here she can carry that certification around.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: We all know stories about let's say dishwasher tapos naging sous-chef na 'di ba. There are stories like that eh.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Yes, exactly. Welding is another kind. Somebody who may have just spent maybe five, 10, 15 years in a construction company in Saudi but acquired the skills of a welder and a good one at that, so again we can have them certified by the TESDA so that there's a proper, should I, say assessment and certification of their skills knowledge again they can use when they are there or when they come home here to work for a construction company.

So, these things are among the things/measures that we're looking at. The other thing is similar to the point made about Singapore. Perhaps we could have an arrangement with let's say a Singaporean institution or a foreign employer who could have specific educational or training requirements here and have that employer touch base with a training institution here so that the proper skills can be acquired here for free and of course mindful of our own talent pool and talent base. So that way, we also develop a talent pool and talent base that is world-class, hindi lang para doon sa specific employer na iyon pero kung alam na natin iyong standard noong employer na iyon o ng employers or ng government sa abroad at least maaangat natin iyong training standards that could be suitable for employment here as well as in abroad.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: You have a lot in your plate, Sec., I can see that and we know that. But are there, if you are free to say, are there any other new programs or initiatives that the DMW plans to implement for our OFWs?

DMW SEC. CACDAC: One basic and yet challenging endeavor we're getting into is improving our facilities here and abroad. We have the National Maritime Polytechnic that was established during the Marcos Sr.'s administration in Tacloban – project of the First Lady at that time that we wish to modernize so that, again, our seafarers can be held to, well, they are already held to a world-class standard but to further train local seafarers based on a world-class standards. So, that's one.

And two, our shelters abroad, we wish to modernize and transform them to centers of excellence in training and should I say, places or venues where OFWs, Filipino communities could come together and socialize and train and have different types of courses that they could have to enhance their skills, recreational, perhaps, facilities also along those lines. So, improvement of our shelters and what we call Migrant Workers Resource Center is under the law, it's really a lot more than just a distressed worker shelter facility that we are looking at.

Of course, we will still be mindful of distressed workers who need shelter abroad. But improvement of our shelter would be another one that we are looking at. Perhaps, another measure would be improvement of our legal assistance services. Last year, we inherited the legal assistance program of the DFA, so it's been a year since July this year. So, we wish to have to haul our lawyers, hired lawyers abroad to a higher standard.

Recently, we had some good news in the sense that we have convictions of perpetrators of OFW victims abroad in various cases – physical injury cases and rape cases. So, we are mindful of the progress in terms of our drive to achieve justice, obtain justice for our OFWs who need such abroad.

So, we are strengthening our legal assistance program, by hiring more lawyers, hiring in-house and external counsel, having more paralegals, having more Sharia lawyers on the Islamic side.

So, we wish to boost and hold our legal assistance services to a higher metric or higher standard as well, so we deliver quality services to our workers among the many things that we plan to do, Cris.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: There are many, many things that I can see, that you know firsthand and that you are doing. So once again, Department of Migrant Workers Secretary Hans Leo Cacdac, thank you so much for gracing us today, thank you for your time actually with everything that you have listed out right here and mentioned. Thank you for your passion, your dedication and commitment to taking care of our Overseas Filipino Workers.

DMW SEC. CACDAC: Thank you for having me and it's great to see you again, Cris, and hope to see you on the foreign trips of the President abroad and yes, we will continue, we will soldier on to further help our OFWs. We owe this much to our OFWs and to our OFW President.

PCO DIR. VILLONCO: Ang Department of Migrant Workers ay itinuturing na tahanan ng OFWs. Kaya hangad ng ahensiya ang patuloy na pagbibigay proteksiyon para matiyak ang kanilang kaligtasan, masiguro ang kapakanan at mapangalagaan ang mga karapatan. Kaisa ng bawat OFW ang DMW sa pag-abot ng kanilang mga pangarap para sa sarili, sa pamilya at sa bayan. Mabuhay ang makabagong bayani!

Join us again tomorrow as we bring you in-depth views of the latest issues and regular Palace updates. Sitting in for Daphne Oseña-Paez, this is Cris Villonco for Malacañang Insider. Have a great day.

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