

Deportations may lead to collapse of Malaysia economy

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MANILA, Philippines -- The economy of Malaysia, particularly of Sabah, could collapse if its government continues with the crackdown and deportation of so-called illegal migrant workers, including hundreds of thousands of Filipinos, a Filipino diplomat said.

The diplomat, who requested anonymity as he does not have any authority to speak on the issue, affirmed earlier reports that Filipinos in Sabah are allowed to vote in Sabah elections, and that they are then deported in regular anti-illegal migrants campaigns.

"This follows a regular cycle. After every election, the politicians seek to show their teeth and after a concessional deportation of a few thousands, they would again look the other way because they also realize the contribution that our people have on their economy. Without them, their economy would collapse," he said.

The diplomat said the number of Filipinos in Sabah alone could reach as many as 400,000.

While there are no official estimates, Foreign Affairs Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs Esteban Conejos puts the number at around 200,000, while Malaysia puts the number at around 300,000.

Told that the Malaysian government has expressed "seriousness" in ridding the island of "illegal migrants," the unnamed Filipino diplomat said, "Their seriousness is limited by their logistics. Imagine deporting that many people. They would lose their shirt."

Both sides agree that the Philippines' un-acted claim over Sabah complicates the deportation further because while the country seeks for an orderly deportation of Filipinos from Sabah, it cannot formally set up a consulate office there as it would effectively be recognizing Malaysia's claim over Sabah. A consulate office in Sabah would facilitate the documentation of the deportees, who for the most part were born and raised in Sabah and know no other home but Sabah.

Malaysia contends that it has jurisdiction over Sabah because the people of Sabah have so chosen, and it occupies the oil-rich island. International law experts agree that occupation is nine-tenths of any similar claim.

The Philippines' claim is based on historical records, which indicate that the sultanate of Sulu owns Sabah. This is supported by the annual lease payment made by the Sabah government to the sultan and his heirs.

After the March elections in Malaysia, its government has stepped up deportations, sending back around 250 "illegal migrants" each week to Zamboanga City, where the Philippine government has set up a one-stop processing center composed of officials from the Department of Labor and

Employment, Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

This contentious issue will be the main topic at the Fifth Philippines-Malaysia Working Group Meeting on Migrant Workers that is scheduled on Monday and Tuesday. This meeting, which started in 2005, is an annual forum to address bilateral concerns on the status of Filipino migrant workers in Malaysia.

Conejos, who heads the Philippine delegation in this meeting, said the forum is timely.

"The issues expected to be discussed during the meeting are the overall status of Filipino migrant workers and refugees [IMM13 cardholders]," he said.

He said the two governments will also tackle the recruitment of Filipino workers; the processes of arrest, detention, and repatriation of undocumented workers; and the programs to regularize their stay in Malaysia through the issuance of machine-readable Philippine passports.

The two parties will also discuss broader themes and common security concerns such as human trafficking, border control, and immigration.

Conejos said he hopes the meeting with Malaysian authorities would ensure the welfare and protection of documented Filipino workers, as well as the orderly repatriation of undocumented workers.

Source: Veronica Uy



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