

Arroyo administration abandons 30,000 Filipinos trapped in Lebanon

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An estimated 30,000 Filipino workers, mostly women employed as domestic helpers, have been trapped in Lebanon during Israel's month-long offensive. According to the Philippine department of foreign affairs, at least 2,000 were in southern Lebanon, which has borne the brunt of the bombardment.

Less than 5,000 Filipinos had been evacuated when the UN's ceasefire came into effect on Monday. President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's administration failed to provide adequate assistance to those caught in Lebanon. Only as Israel stepped up its ground invasion of southern Lebanon and extended its aerial bombardment to Beirut and northern Lebanon did the president finally issue a mandatory evacuation order and call on Filipinos to "leave while the window for escaping is still open".

In what amounts to an indictment of social conditions in the Philippines, many workers refused to leave the war zone, preferring to keep their menial jobs in the Middle East rather than face a life of desperate poverty in their native country. Most Filipinos in Lebanon earn just \$150 to \$200 a month, but this is still 30 percent more than the minimum monthly wage in the Philippines.

Moreover, as many as 80 percent of Filipino workers in Lebanon are believed to be undocumented and have neither Lebanese nor Philippine working permits. Workers feared that evacuation would leave them open to legal sanctions and prevent them from returning to their jobs in Lebanon.

Israel, backed by the US, has created the disaster for the people of Lebanon, including hundreds of thousands of foreign workers. But Arroyo and her administration are also culpable for the plight of the 30,000 Filipinos.

Throughout the conflict, the government issued no

protests to Tel Aviv, even as the bombardment blocked its evacuation plans. Israel's ongoing air and naval blockade of Lebanon, and destruction of roads and bridges throughout the country, severely limited the ability of Filipino workers to escape the conflict. At one point, 800 workers were left camped inside a Catholic Church in Beirut after Israeli missiles destroyed three major bridges on the route to Damascus.

For weeks, the Philippine government, despite mounting concerns from workers' relatives and families, refused to issue an evacuation order. The administration insisted that Filipinos were not at risk in most of the country. On July 23, Vice President Noli de Castro declared that Israeli "specific precision bombings" meant civilians were not in imminent danger.

Officials even put a positive spin on the situation after Israel began its bombardment of Beirut. Almost two weeks into Israel's offensive, Roy Cimatu, Filipino special envoy to the Middle East, told the *Sun Star Daily* that life appeared normal in Beirut. "The banks and groceries are still open and traffic is still heavy here," he declared.

These comments demonstrated Manila's abject subservience to the Bush administration. For the government, the lives of vulnerable and impoverished workers in Lebanon are worth far less than maintaining the Filipino-US alliance.

Since September 11, Arroyo has been a loyal ally of Washington's bogus "war on terror." She has backed an indefinite deployment of US military personnel in the Philippine region of Mindanao, to participate in joint military operations against Islamist militants. And while ostensibly neutral during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the Arroyo administration quickly lined up during

the division of spoils, dispatching a military contingent and sending workers to help build and operate five US military bases in Iraq.

There are also economic calculations behind the government's response. Nearly 8 million Filipinos are working around the world, most in Asia and the Middle East. At least one million of these are undocumented, and live in constant fear of being sacked, deported or imprisoned. Migrant workers endure deplorable working and living conditions and poverty-level wages.

According to figures from 2003, workers return \$12 billion every year to the Philippines. This money equates to more than one-quarter of the country's gross national product, or about 100 times the total foreign direct investment. The policy of exporting cheap labour was first initiated by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1974, and has been maintained by his successors, including the current president.

As well as collecting revenue from fees imposed on documented workers' remittances, the government welcomes the foreign workers' money as a means of avoiding taking responsibility for providing adequate, publicly funded, education, health, and welfare services.



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