

JGL Eye

By JOSEPH G. LARIOSA

CHICAGO (jGLi) --What started as a tourism come-on by President Marcos to lure overseas Filipinos to visit their homeland has grown into a full-blown commercial enterprise that could jeopardize not only the tourism and overseas banking industries but also defense industry.

The Balikbayan (returning Filipino) program gives overseas Filipinos a chance to keep their ties with their relatives and friends by wrapping their padala (gifts) in Balikbayan boxes and sending them to the Philippines if they could not make it back to their homeland.

But some enterprising Filipinos have turned the program into a thriving travel, cargo business, banking (remittance) center industries. Because Balikbayan boxes are tax-free, the program has spawned a multi-national cottage industry in cargo forwarding and even enabled money-transmitting business to open banks in the Philippines.

Until the revelation in Philippine Congress last Monday (May 16), smuggling of expensive SUV's (sports utility vehicles) and carnapped vehicles and motorcycles and firearms under the Balikbayan program that has the backing of Filipino politicians had largely come under the radar.

I just hope the House subcommittee on Customs chaired by Ilocos Norte Rep. Rodolfo Farinas will continue to investigate these smuggling activities "in aid of legislation" to find out if there is a

U.S. G.I. MILITARY EQUIPMENT LOADED IN BALIKBAYAN BOXES - MabuhayRadio

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need to review the Balikbayan Program that had been amended several times but was left with no safeguards that can detect blatant abuses and violations of this tourism come-on.

In a previous column early this year, I wrote that some Philippine Customs officials have been unduly enriched by the Balikbayan program. Because sending Balikbayan boxes is tax free, Philippine Customs officials have demanded some kind of grease money from Filipino forwarding businessmen if the forwarders do not want their Balikbayan boxes "inspected piece-by-piece."

The only problem: the international economy went into a tailspin a few years ago that some low-income cargo forwarders can no longer come up with the grease money for the Philippine Customs officials. The forwarders can no longer apply for a loan either from banks to cover their overhead and come up with the stash money pool demanded by Philippine Customs officials.

U.S. G.I. EQUIPMENT LOADED IN BALIKBAYAN BOXES

One Chicago-area cargo forwarder got a pleasant surprise when he ran out of money to "bail out" his container of Balikbayan boxes from Philippine Customs.

One of the senders of the Balikbayan boxes pressed the forwarder into releasing his boxes from the Philippine Customs because they are loaded with "U.S. government military-issue equipment or items" destined for Mindanao.

The forwarder asked for a list of inventory of the contents from the sender "as we would need to present that to the Philippine Customs for proper declaration." He made the request last April 25, 2011 but has not heard from the sender as of this writing.

I asked the Balikbayan box sender, who appears to be a U.S. enforcement officer, if these "U.S. government military-issue equipment or items" were cleared with the U.S. government before loading them into Balikbayan boxes. He told me the "U.S. Military Equipment" are actually "my flight uniforms, manuals, books, military awards; achievements, there is no need for any special forms or permissions/declarations needed" before loading them in Balikbayan boxes.

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I told him transporting U.S. military equipment should be a government-to-government transaction. He should get first clearance “thru channel” with officials of the Visiting Forces Agreement or U.S. and Philippine Customs before sending these items to the Philippines. If military equipment can be freely loaded into Balikbayan boxes, like the “disassembled cars” and firearms, loading “disassembled” nuclear weapon and illegal drugs into Balikbayan boxes will not be far behind. Nuclear weapons are banned on Philippine soil by the Philippine Constitution. The U.S. enforcement officer told the Chicago forwarder that he sent 39 Balikbayan boxes shipped from Palos Hills, Illinois to the Philippines last Nov. 27, 2010 and paid \$1,965 cash and the “personal belongings” in the Balikbayan boxes are “sitting in Manila Customs/Port since Jan. 31, 2011.

OVERDUE BY ONE YEAR

The forwarder involved has stopped receiving new Balikbayan boxes from customers as he struggles to raise money to pay for his Philippine Customs “dues” that will let him take out his containers of Balikbayan boxes from the Customs warehouse before they are sold at public auction.

Meanwhile, Alex Cirera, who owns a cargo forwarding company in Chicago, Illinois, was able to let the Philippine Customs release “10 containers filled with hundreds of Balikbayan boxes from the Philippine Bureau of Customs” when Shipping Express Philippines, Inc., owned by his son, failed to raise “enough money to pay for ocean freight, customs duties, demurrage and storage fees.”

But some Balikbayan senders have not withdrawn their complaints against the Shipping Express pending before the Illinois Attorney General’s office for not delivering their Balikbayan boxes on time. On the other hand, a Balikbayan box sender has complained to this columnist that until now his Balikbayan box that he sent thru PNB Cargo Services in Los Angeles, California has remained undelivered. He said his shipment, which carries a House Bill of Lading No. CA 18415, has been more than a year overdue for delivery to the consignee.

A call placed by this columnist to PNB Cargo Services, one of the affiliates of the Philippine National Bank, was not answered. PNB Cargo Services is located at 3345 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 230, Los Angeles, CA 90010, Tel. 888.762.4284 and Fax. No. 213.381.5888. The sender was

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informed that his Balikbayan box was mixed with Balikbayan boxes in a container that yielded firearms.

And meanwhile, a 75-year-old widow, Marietta C. Gino of San Francisco, California, emailed this columnist, saying that she sent last Jan. 9 and Feb. 1, 2010 two Balikbayan boxes thru ACE (Associated Consolidations Express) Balikbayan Boxes Direct of 1273 Industrial Parkway, Unit 390, Hayward, CA 94544 Tels. 510.690.1777 and 510.690.9777. But until now, her boxes have not yet reached her consignees. A phone message could not be left by this reporter at ACE as the phone receiver is full.

For future senders, if there is a change in the Balikbayan Program, chances are, they will no longer be paying from a measly \$45- to \$85-fee to send a Balikbayan box of goodies. They will probably be paying the same rate as that of the U.S. Postal Service, Federal Express or UPS, which assess freight payment, depending on weight, and could come up to the neighborhood of from \$700 to \$800 per Balikbayan box. And, of course, there is going to be a longer wait of delivery as each content of the Balikbayan boxes would have to be inspected piece-by-piece to screen firearms, chopped-up car parts, and other expensive cargoes that call for higher tax charges and illegal drugs. lariosa_jos@sbcglobal.net

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