

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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C HICAGO (*FAXX/jGLi*) – Although, Rodelio “Dondon” Celistino Lanuza is looking forward to his freedom, he is appealing for help for other Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW’s), who are still in the Death Row.

In an email forwarded to this reporter by his OFW supporter from Bahrain, Ms. Janice Azur, Mr. Lanuza said, “*Ako po ay lubusang nagagalak sa isang napakagandang balita. Naipahayag na po ni Bise Presidente Jejomar Binay na ako po ay LIGTAS NA SA PARUSANG BITAY.*”

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” (I am very happy over a beautiful news. Philippine Vice President Jejomar Binay had announced that I will be TAKEN OFF THE DEATH ROW .)

“Maraming maraming salamat una sa Panginoon at Kanyang dininig ang aking taimtim na panalangin. Sa Saudi Government at sa pamilya ng aking nasawi .” (Thank very much first of all to God, who listened to my heartfelt prayer. Thank you also to the Saudi Government and the surviving family members of my victim.)

The 38-year-old draftsman, who has been in jail for the last 12 years, said, *“Maraming maraming salamat sa lahat ng taong tumulong at naging parte ng aking freedom campaign. Hindi ko na po muna mailalahad ang lahat ng pangalan ng aking nais pasalamat at baka po ako ay may makaligtaan. Ngunit alam ko sa puso at isip ninyo kung sino man kayo na mga walang sawang sumuporta, nagdasal at nagbigay ng tulong pinansiyal para sa aking kalayaan.”*

(Thank you very much also to all the people who helped me and became part of my freedom campaign. I don't want to mention the names of those I want to thank for because I don't want to miss the name of anybody. But I know deep in your heart and your mind whoever you are who never tired in helping me, praying for me and giving financial aid for my freedom.)

The Manila-native, who got a scare of his life when he learned last September that the Philippine Embassy was informed by the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs that a Royal Order has been issued ordering the implementation of the Court's decision (beheading) against the offender as affirmed by the court, said,

"Nakikiusap din po ako sa patuloy po ang ating bayanihan para sa iba pang taong nangangailangan lalong lalo na sa maraming OFWs na nangangailangan ng tulong. Makakaasa po kayo na

kaisa ninyo ako sa pagtulong sa ating kapwa Pilipino. ” (I pledge to help other countrymen by working together to help others, who are in need, particularly the many OFW’s, who need our help. Rest assured that I always be there to help my fellow Filipinos.)

VP BINAY THANKS SAUDI KING

V ice President Binay, Presidential Adviser for OFW Concerns, said Friday the Philippine government was thanking the Saudi government for its decision to shoulder the nearly 25-million pesos (US\$595,238) balance in blood money for Death Row inmate Lanuza.

“On behalf of President Aquino, we would like to express our most sincere thanks to His Excellency King Abdullah for his

gesture of kindness. This gesture once again affirms the strong ties of friendship and brotherhood between the Philippines and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," Vice President Binay said.

The Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia announced on Thursday that its government had issued a directive for the payment of the balance of 2.3 million Saudi Riyals for handing over to the heirs of the victims of Lanuza, who had admitted to stabbing an Arab in self-defense in June 2000 and was sentenced in 2002 to death by beheading.

In February 2011, the Philippine government and the Saudi Reconciliation Committee in Dammam, Saudi Arabia, helped him secure forgiveness from the offended family. The family required a *diyya* or compensation worth P35 million.

The embassy noted that the family had filed an appeal to the Saudi government after paying an initial 700,000 Riyals (P7.6 million).

Mr. Binay apologized for not publicly commenting on the case of Lanuza and other Filipinos on Death Row to forestall any negative reaction from relatives of the survivors.

In a statement, the Department of Foreign Affairs Sec. Albert Del Rosario also thanked the Saudi government and the “tireless effort and steadfast commitment of Filipinos working together.”

Secretary Del Rosario added that the freedom of Lanuza “was due in no small part to the invaluable contribution and dedication of Filipino American businesswoman Loida Nicolas-Lewis, the person who led the private sector’s fundraising efforts.”

Del Rosario also paid gratitude to the Philippine Embassy in Riyadh, led by Ambassador Ezzedin Tago, for the assistance for Lanuza throughout his incarceration and to the other individuals who donated various amounts to save Lanuza’s life.

The DFA had earlier said that the next step in the process would be to secure the Saudi court’s order for Lanuza’s release.

STRUGGLE FOR POSSESSION OF A KNIFE

Lanuza was 22-years old when he went to Saudi in 1996 after finishing his architecture degree at Manuel L. Quezon University. He returned to the Philippines twice.

In November 2000, Lanuza was invited by two other fellow OFWs to a dinner in the home of a Saudi host. As his two companions were leaving, Lanuza was prevailed upon by the host to stay. After a brief joyride, Lanuza and the host went back to the Saudi host's home. A struggle for possession of a knife ensued, causing Lanuza to kill his Saudi host in self-defense.

In June 10, 2002, Lanuza was sentenced to die by beheading. Lanuza was forgiven by the surviving victim's family but he had to pay blood money worth 5-million riyal (US\$1.3-million). Lanuza's lawyer was able to reduce the blood money to 3-million riyal (35-million Philippine pesos or US\$800,000) to be equally divided among surviving three children at 1-million riyal (US\$266,645 or 10.8-million Philippine pesos) each.

The Lanuza family led by Attorney Lewis was able to raise 70,000 riyal or 7.5-million Philippine pesos or US\$18,665. Saudi King Abdulla bin Abdulzaiz Al Saud agreed to pay the balance of P24.9-million or US\$611,718 or 2.2-million riyal. Fund raising was conducted thru television TFC, Youtube, Twitter and email campaign.

Lanuza's father, Edilberto F. Lanuza is from San Leonardo, Nueva Ecija, who works at a gaming company in Las Vegas, Nevada

. While his mother, Letty Celistino, is from San Jose, Nueva Ecija, who works at

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LBC

Cargo, a Filipino American company in
Las Vegas

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Lanuza is married with two step children.

Garry Martinez, Migrante International chair, said, there are about four OFW's in Saudi Death Row. Payment of blood money was not an assurance of freedom as in the case of brothers and Edison Gonzales and Eduardo Arcilla, who were sentenced in Saudi Arabia in 2006 to be beheaded for the murder of fellow Filipinos Romeo Lumbang, Jeremias Bucud and Dante Rivero.

The Gonzaleses and Arcilla reportedly claimed that they were tortured into admitting the crime. In 2010, the relatives of the victims received blood money from the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office.

According to Saudi law, payment of blood money does not ensure the commutation of sentence or the release from prison of convicts, so the Gonzaleses and Arcilla remain on Death Row in Saudi Arabia.

It was reported that there are 122 Filipinos on Death Row in foreign prisons. Migrante International is handling eight of these cases. # # #

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