

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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CHICAGO (jGLi) – Fifteen Filipinos, who became victims of labor trafficking to Florida, will appear before the Eastern District court of New York at 225 Cadman Plaza East, Brooklyn

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New York
today, Sept. 24, according to a press release from the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns (NAFCON), U.S. Northeast in New York

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NAFCON urged its members, allied organizations and concerned individuals in the community to pack the courtroom and show support for their case.

Some of these Filipinos called “Florida 15” or “F15” have pending cases of deportation after the failure of their Philippine-based recruiters to renew their H2-B visas.

They recently obtained an “initial subsistence fund amounting to \$333.33 per victim” as labor trafficked victims apparently from the Philippine government.

"It is through community support and consistent community pressure that we push the government to answer for its obligations to its distressed nationals," states Michelle Saulon, the North East Regional Coordinator for NAFCON. Ms. Saulon

vowed to continue to follow up with the Philippine government the legal assistance and subsistence funds of the labor trafficked victims and the immediate prosecution of the traffickers.

The Filipinos, called “Florida 15” or “F15,” were recruited between 2008 to 2009 by the Philippine-based San Villa Ship Management Co. owned by Jojo Villanueva. They were to work at different country clubs and hotels in Florida as waiters, cooks, and housekeepers after paying from \$2,500 to \$7,000 placement fees.

When they started working, they were given only \$6 per hour instead of the prevailing rate of \$16-\$17 per hour in the area of their assignments. They had no overtime. They were paid monthly and belatedly.

Aside from the late payment, the agency that recruited them also failed to renew their H2-B visas. The workers were not notified of their expired visas despite their consistent follow up. Because they are out of immigration status, some of them were arrested by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Agency, which is processing them for deportation.

"The 'Florida 15' is only one group among the thousands of trafficked victims who are in need of immediate assistance, support and protection for their rights and welfare," Saulon continued.

The F15 workers are also fighting for their right to obtain T-visas. Atty. Felix Vinluan, immigration and labor lawyer who has helped trafficked Filipino workers over the years, is currently handling the case.

Fight Against Labor Export Policy and Human Trafficking

NAFCON acknowledges the institutional and structural problems that breed human and labor trafficking.

"As long as there is no genuine land reform and national industrialization in our homeland, landlessness and joblessness will persist. Coupled with the Labor Export Policy (LEP) implemented by the Philippine government, these policies and practices will continue to cause thousands of Filipinos to migrate overseas, suffer exploitation and become vulnerable to trafficking. We have a whole system of migrant workers' exploitation ahead of us that needs to be fought against," states Jonna Baldres, national deputy general secretary of NAFCON.

NAFCON has also been extending support to other Filipino victims of human and labor trafficking. Among them are the Sentosa 27++ nurses, Arizona 34, South Carolina 12, Adman 11, Teachers from Los Angeles

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Maryland

and countless individuals, such as Elma Manliguez, Leticia Moratal and Jacqueline Aguirre, who were victims of unfair labor laws and regulations, slavery, inhumane working conditions and discrimination from their employers. They were once victims and are now fighting survivors advocating and empowering others to come out and fight for their rights and welfare.

The F15 workers, who have been struggling for almost 2 years, urged other trafficked victims to come forward and ventilate their concerns.

Stop Trafficking Our People (STOP)

A side from the demands of the Florida 15 workers, NAFCON, with its overall Stop Trafficking Our People (STOP) Campaign, also brings to the attention of the Philippine government its responsibility to check and investigate the employment agencies such as San Villa Management Co. for allowing them to operate. These agencies had allowed workers to leave the Philippines without going thru the Philippine Overseas and Employment Agency (POEA).

The STOP Campaign is currently coordinated by the STOP Task Force. For more information or to volunteer for the STOP Task Force, please contact Michelle at michelle.saulon@gmail.com or Yves Nibungco yvesnibungco@gmail.com
at yvesnibungco@gmail.com . # # #

Watch out for the upcoming media-outlet oriented,

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