



MIGRANTE INTERNATIONAL

"We dream of a society that will never be torn apart just for the need to survive!"

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PRESS STATEMENT

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Lift the ban entry to HK! Stranded OFWs in the Philippines plead for pressing relief

Allow stranded overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) to enter Hong Kong!

This is the urgent call of HK bound Filipino domestic workers stranded in the Philippines due to the ban imposed by the Hong Kong government in response to the COVID crisis. In an online consultation meeting organized by Migrante International on August 4, 2021, the OFWs appealed for the lifting of the HK entry ban that prevented them from their gainful employment and livelihood.

A recent announcement to ease the ban raised hopes for the stranded overseas workers whose visa will expire in the coming months. Most of them have been fully vaccinated and are ready to comply with the health protocols required by the HK government. They look forward to be included as residents contributing to the HK economy and helping their employers to be productive citizens as well.

Meanwhile, strapped for cash for being stranded, these victims of the entry ban expect financial assistance from the Duterte government which is responsible in making the Philippines a high risk COVID country due to its laxity in controlling the spread of the pandemic since its outbreak. Why do OFWs suffer because of the Duterte government's ineptitude in handling the virus? Instead of lockdowns, financial relief and government temporary shelter should have been immediately provided to the stranded OFWs who come from far-flung provinces without relatives to rely on in Metro Manila.

But no! This government is not at all bothered as hundreds or even thousands of stranded OFWs lose their jobs and endure hunger and anxiety hoping and praying that the ban would be lifted soon. Meanwhile, it's business as usual for the recruitment agencies as they require stranded OFWs to undergo multiple medical tests when their employer backed out because of the entry ban. Of course, same thing goes with government agencies like Philhealth, POEA, OWWA and others that collect mandatory fees in the processing of new employment contracts.

Such is the case of Beverly who claims it's her first time to apply for work in HK but her flight has been cancelled 5 times and her visa will soon expire next month. She has been waiting for her departure for more than a year in Manila but she was forced to go back home to Pangasinan last month since she no longer had money to pay her boarding house. She is hopeful that her employer will wait for her and that the Philippine government can give financial assistance to relieve her family.

Maricar from Iloilo was scheduled to fly in April this year but she was caught in the entry ban. Her visa will expire in September this year although her employer is willing to wait for her. She has been renting a boarding house in Muntinlupa which she claims cost so much that she wants the government to give assistance because it's really difficult to rent a boarding house which is very expensive.

Maria has been stranded for two years because her employment contract has been cancelled two times. She had to undergo medical test four times because of this. She has incurred so much debt because of her long stay in Manila. Her husband asked her to return to Isabela in the meantime while waiting for the lifting of entry ban and hoping to receive ayuda from the government.

Geraldine from Cagayan Valley is deep in debt because of being a stranded. "Please give us financial aid and help lift the ban now," she said. Byrdlyn: *Lugaw na lang ang kinakain ko sa tinitirhan ko* (I endure eating porridge in the boarding house). Marilou from Cagayan de Oro complained that her agency required her to undergo another medical exam before the first test expired. Even worse, some who were already in Manila were required to return to Cagayan de Oro to have their dose of the vaccine.

Their distressful situation prompted them to seek help from Migrant International to bring their concerns to the Hong Kong government. In response, UNIFIL MIGRANTE HK chairperson Dolores Balladares provided the latest announcement from the HK government stating that residents can go back if they have completed the health protocol requirements. However, there is a need to clarify who are considered 'residents' since foreign domestic workers (FDWs) who have HK ID and employment visa are also residents in Hong Kong. She assured that her group is coordinating with the Phil Consulate to lobby with the HK government for FDWs to be allowed re-entry especially those with complete vaccine dose.

The consultation concluded with a resolution to bring the earnest concerns of the stranded FDWs both to the attention of the Hong Kong and Philippine governments by sending letters of appeal to relieve them especially with renewed enhanced community quarantine due to a spike in the Delta variant of COVID virus in the National Capital Region.

Specifically, these are their demands:

1. For the HK government in lifting the entry ban to include FDWs without discrimination;
2. For the HK government to ensure that the cost of quarantine will not be a cause for employers to terminate the FDWs' employment contract;
3. For the Philippine government to prioritize stranded OFWs as recipients of cash relief;
4. For the Philippine government to ensure that OFWs with approved visa will be given priority for free vaccine;
5. For the Philippine government to provide temporary accommodation in lieu of financial assistance for renting boarding house; and
6. For the recruitment agencies to refrain from using OFWs as hostage in collecting excessive fees and requiring multiple mandatory medical examination.

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