

REMARKS OF MR. RENATO P.O. VILLA AT THE OPENING OF THE 13TH CONFERENCE OF PHILIPPINE SCHOOLS OVERSEAS IN PUERTO PRINCESA CITY, PALAWAN ON 13 MAY 2015

Secretary Bro. Armin Luistro

Undersecretary Mary Grace Tirona, Executive Director of the Commission on Filipinos Overseas my office to attend this

Vice Mayor Luis Marcaida III

Labor Attaché David Des Dicang

Director Jocelyn Hapal of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration

A pleasant good morning!

I just learned yesterday that I was designated by my office to attend this conference of Philippine Schools Overseas. My colleague, Consul Lorenzo Rhys Jungco, was supposed to attend. Just four days ago, he was dispatched to Islamabad to assume his post as Charge d'Affaires of our Embassy in Pakistan after Ambassador Domingo Lucenario tragically died in a helicopter crash. Like soldiers, we go where we are sent.

My first foreign assignment, from 1997 to 2003, was as a Vice Consul, and later Consul, in the Philippine Embassy in Abu Dhabi. And the very first event which then Ambassador Roy Seneres asked me to attend was a sports event at a Philippine school with the clichéd theme "A sound mind in a sound body." Just 5 days in, I still felt jet lagged but I felt the warm welcome of the teachers, parents and children.

During my assignment, I was assigned to head the Assistance-to-Nationals Unit. During that time, I sealed the casket of more than 500 of our nationals who died of various causes. I also attended court hearings and conducted hospital and prison visits. But there were happier occasions. I also solemnized the marriage of more than 500 Filipino couples. I distinctly remember officiating the marriage of Mr. Alex Acosta and his wife in a posh hotel in Abu Dhabi. Nalaman ko ngayon lang na may doctorate na siya at may dalawa ng anak. Congratulations, Alex!

Hindi nga pala namin ikinakasal sa Embahada kung ang kabilang partido ay isang foreigner. Binibigyan lamang namin ng Certificate of Legal Capacity to Contract Marriage at yung Pilipino at banyaga ay magpapakasal na sa simbahan, mosque o embahada ng banyaga.

Nais ko lamang ipaalala na pag sila ay naikasal na, dapat bumalik ang Pilipina sa Embahada upang iparehistro ang kasal sa Embahada. The embassy will forward the record to the Consular Records Division of the DFA which in turn would transmit it to the

Civil Registry Division of the National Statistics Office (NSO), which is now called the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Kung magkaroon man ng problema ang kanilang pagsasama o magkaroon ng problema sa custody ng kanilang mga anak sa mga susunod na araw, makasisiguro na may record ng kasal sa Pilipinas.

Gayundin, kung may batang Pilipinong ipinanganak sa labas ng ating bansa, dapat ding ipaalam sa Embahada at ang Embahada ay mag-iisyu ng Report of Birth for onward transmittal din sa PHL Statistics Authority upang magkaroon ng identity at record ang bata bilang Pilipino.

Ipagpaalam ninyo ang prosesong ito sa inyong mga constituents sa labas ng bansa dahil kuminsan ay kanilang nakakalimutan.

I was later posted to Amman, Jordan for 3 years where there were more than 20,000 Filipinos, most of whom are undocumented domestic workers and then to Malaysia, including Sabah where there were more than 400,000 undocumented Filipinos and where there are no Philippine schools. And so I got a sense of the difference of a place where there is a PHL school and a country without one.

First off, parents in a place without a PHL school could hardly afford to send their children to an international school. Too often, the local authorities do not allow migrants to enroll their child in the local public school. Even some Embassy staff are forced to leave their children in the Philippines as sending them to an international school is an expensive proposition.

Second, Filipino children lose their sense of being a Filipino; when they come home, they become strangers in their own country.

There are, however, challenges in establishing and maintaining a PHL school. There is the question of economic viability; whether it could earn enough or there would be enough enrolment to continue its operations. There is also the issue of being able to comply with the regulations of the host country regarding schools. For example, in the UAE, the Ministry of Education issued an order stating that schools should not be located in a residential area as schools disturb the peace and quiet of residential neighborhoods. Some PHL schools could not comply or could not relocate and they have to close.

Let me mention at this point the special case of the more than 30,000 undocumented Filipino children in Sabah with no access to both health care and education. With the help of some NGOs and the Filipino community in Sabah, some Filipino children were able to enroll in so-called alternative basic education centers.

It also helped that the NSO issued a Memorandum Circular in 2013, which allowed the Embassy to attest the Report of Birth of an undocumented Filipino child in Sabah even if the Malaysian Civil Registry Department does not issue birth certificates to children of

undocumented migrant workers. After 3 months, the next of kin of the child in the PHL could obtain a birth certificate for her or him at PSA (formerly NSO) and she or he would now have an identity document indicating that she or he is a Filipino.

To illustrate the importance of having a PHL school which adheres to the PHL curriculum prescribed by DepEd, let me mention that some Filipino parents in Sabah enroll their children in Indonesian schools. And so the Filipino children enrolled in those schools learn to speak Bahasa Indonesia and also imbibe Indonesian culture and history, as well as learn to revere and look up to Indonesian heroes, instead of Rizal, Bonifacio, Ninoy Aquino.

But the alternative basic education learning centers in Sabah produced some success stories. Several children with basic education went home to Mindanao and passed the DepEd acceleration exams and many went on to finish high school. There was a lump in my throat when I overheard a Malaysian teacher say in 2009 that a Filipino child topped the Malaysian high school exams in Sabah for those proceeding to university. The teacher said the boy is the son a Filipino palm oil plantation worker.

I should mention that our current Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, Ambassador Ezzedin Tago, is a product of the PHL school in Jeddah. Many children of our Embassy personnel are alumni of PHL schools, particularly in the Middle East.

You should therefore be proud of what you have achieved but you should move forward and do things better in order to develop and progress in a challenging and complex environment.

Muli, magandang umaga at maraming salamat! END