

Palace: GMA intervention saved 24 OFWs from execution

Malacañang officials disclosed yesterday that President Arroyo's personal intervention with kings and heads of state, particularly in the Middle East, has saved some 24 overseas Filipino workers from execution

and secured the freedom of 11 other OFWs since 2006.

Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita and Presidential Management Staff Cerge Remonde in separate statements thanked Kuwaiti Emir Sabah Al-Ah-

By PAOLO ROMERO

mad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah who signed a decree last July 8 that commuted the death sentence of Filipina maid May Vecina to life imprisonment.

Vecina was convicted of killing her employer's youngest son Salem Sulaiman Al-Otaib on Jan. 6, 2007. She was also accused of trying to kill the victim's 13-year-old brother and wounded his 17-year-old sister.

Vice President Noli de Castro on Friday said Philippine embassy officials in Kuwait are still working to get a pardon for Vecina and another detained OFW Marilou Ranario after the Kuwaiti emir saved them from execution.

Ranario, 35, was convicted in 2005 for killing her female employer. In 2007, the Kuwaiti Supreme Court upheld the conviction. But in December that year, the emir spared her from execution following a visit and plea from Mrs. Arroyo.

It can be recalled that the President also personally appealed to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to save Sara Dematera from death row. Dematera was repatriated to the Philippines and reunited with her family in May 2007.

Officials said Mrs. Arroyo

wrote a letter of gratitude to the emir for his latest act of sparing the life of another OFW.

"You can see that we have a compassionate president," Ermita said. "Our President goes out of her way to talk to prime ministers, kings and emirs to save the lives of our fellow Filipinos."

Remonde said "the commutation of the death sentence of Vecina by the Kuwaiti emir is another demonstration of the high standing and respect President Arroyo enjoys in the international community."

"It is indeed a pity that a person is not a prophet in her own country. When will we ever give President Arroyo the credit she rightfully deserves," he said.

Citing a report from Foreign Affairs Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Esteban Conejos, Ermita said the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has handled 62 death penalty cases involving OFWs since January 2006.

He said the DFA is monitoring 30 death penalty cases in varying stages of judicial proceedings.

"Through the active intervention of the President in 24 death penalty sentences, 11 OFWs have been freed and repatriated," Conejos said.

After a Filipina worker was saved from execution in Kuwait for killing her six-year-old ward and injuring two others, Senate President Manuel Villar Jr. called on the government to provide adequate assistance and equal atten-

tion to other OFWs, who are detained abroad and awaiting execution.

Villar, also Nacionalista Party president, earlier filed Senate Resolution No. 421 urging the Senate to inquire into the status of OFWs in death rows abroad.

In his resolution, Villar cited the latest statistics indicate that there are 35 OFWs facing cases with capital punishment as penalty, including one in Brunei, two in China, one in the United States, four in Kuwait, nine in Saudi Arabia, and 10 in Malaysia.

Villar reiterated his call as he welcomed the news of the commutation of the death sentence of Vecina.

Citing records culled by the Magna Carta for Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos (RA 8042), the Labor Code of the Philippines, treaties on international labor and human rights conventions of which the Philippines is a signatory, and the guarantees of the 1987 Constitution on labor, Villar noted that the government must extend full assistance to our distressed OFWs.

"We should avoid resorting to last-ditch efforts which compromise the safety and security of our OFWs," Villar said.

In coordination with Migrante International, Villar has launched OFW Helpline (0917-4226800), which aims to provide a channel where distressed OFWs and their families can report their predicament.

- With Christina Mendez