

Retrenchments among OFWs only a trickle – GMA

President Arroyo described yesterday layoffs among overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) as "only a trickle" as she unveiled a package of programs to assist displaced workers.

Speaking at Malacañang before some 100 Filipinos who recently lost their jobs in Taiwan, the President stressed that the government is addressing its concerns for OFWs, particularly those who lost their jobs because of the current global financial crisis.

"The government, even if it is only a trickle of our Filipino work force coming back, will not sit idly and do nothing for our modern day heroes in this time of economic uncertainty," she said.

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) said around 1,200 Filipinos, mostly factory workers in Taiwan, lost their jobs and were forced to return home.

One hundred two of the workers were brought to the Palace yesterday to receive an initial assistance package from the government to help them get back on their feet.

Inside woven baskets handed out by the

President were Philhealth membership cards, referral letters from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, OFW Family Club cards from the Social Security System, referrals from the Bureau of Local Employment for those who wish to work in the Philippines and a pledge of commitment from the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority to provide free training on skills most needed at this time.

The President said that livelihood fund checks would also be issued soon by the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) for displaced workers who opt to start a small business or other entrepreneurial activities at home.

During yesterday's ceremony, the President also handed out checks for the displaced OFWs residing in Cavite (P135,000); Visayas and Mindanao (P710,000); Laguna, P70,000; and Pangasinana (P160,000).

The President noted that the checks were given to pay for the materials of the Technology Resource Center of the Department of Sci-

ence and Technology which, under its mandate, is a facilitator in the utilization and active exchange of ideas, information and technology to help create new jobs and livelihood opportunities as well as develop small and medium-sized businesses.

Labor Secretary Mariano Roque pointed out that a total of P250 million has been made available by the various agencies of the government as a Filipino expatriate livelihood support fund.

The funds were sourced from the DOLE, OWWA, the national government and other government agencies.

Displaced OFWs could avail of loans sourced from the fund to start up their own small and medium enterprises.

The President also issued a number of directives aimed at helping the affected OFWs.

The DOLE and OWWA were directed to coordinate and identify the sectors where there is demand for the services of the displaced workers.

Mrs. Arroyo promised to create more good-paying jobs in the country while assuring the displaced workers that the government continuously searches for new markets overseas.

The President noted that 1,000 new jobs have opened up in Bulgaria in the hotel and restaurant sectors.

The President also announced that she has signed an administrative order directing the POEA to conduct a marketing blitz overseas so that the market for the OFWs would be expanded.

Mrs. Arroyo assured the displaced workers that the government will not be remiss in its mandate of helping OFWs who are in distress or in need.

"Our government will not neglect our new heroes, especially at this time of economic uncertainty. We assure you of our full and unequivocal support," the President said in Filipino.

Influx of OFWs

Meanwhile, the country's largest labor group warned of a looming influx of displaced OFWs in the coming weeks due to the global economic crisis.

The Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) said the country may soon experience "reverse migration" wherein thousands of retrenched workers would return home daily.

"The risk of more OFWs getting squeezed in the job markets abroad and forced to come home definitely increases every extra quarter that the world's major economies stay in recession mode," TUCP secretary general Ernesto Herrera. Herrera said the DOLE's initial reports of displaced workers appeared to be "understated" because it does not include those whose contracts were not renewed. "As the crisis deepens, more foreign employers would simply not renew job contracts that expire," Herrera pointed out.

"This is a form of silent retrenchment. Because if we talk of stable manufacturing and service jobs (as opposed to time-bound projects such as construction activities), foreign employers would normally renew job contracts upon expiry, as long as the business concern remains viable," he added.

DOLE earlier reported that about 1,600 OFWs employed in Taiwan, Macau in China, Italy, and other countries abroad have already been displaced as a result of the global economic crisis.

To help the displaced workers, Herrera called on the government to provide employment booths in the country's different parts of entry.

"It is possible that some of the skills of the returning OFWs may be quickly matched with the requirements of a number of local firms. This way, the potential economic dislocation and severance of income is minimized," he said.

— Marvin Sy, Mayen Jaymalin