

**20th Edition of the International Dialogue on Migration:
COVID-19 Crisis: Reimagining the Role of Migrants and
Human Mobility for the Achievement of the SDGs
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Thank you for giving the Philippines the opportunity to share its experience in responding to the needs of vulnerable migrants during this pandemic.

The Philippines has, for over four decades now, worked to bring coherence to our migration governance policies – putting principles into practice when dealing with bilateral and multilateral partners. In our view, the 23 Objectives of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration helps frame issues of international migration, human rights and social protection. The Objectives provide a basis for common understanding on shared responsibilities of nations, keeping in mind that all governments engage in human mobility, regardless of where we are individually on the spectrum of implementing these Objectives.

A milestone for the Philippines in implementing the GCM is the creation of a stand-alone chapter on “Ensuring Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” in the Philippine Development Plan 2017-2022 Midterm Update. This chapter articulates a renewed focus on internationally agreed frameworks on migration, such as the GCM, the ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers, bilateral labor agreements, and MOUs, among others. We are setting protocols for domestic workers; a standardized framework on international migration data; access to government services for overseas Filipinos; social protections in the form of universal health coverage and social security agreements; measures to ensure security and safety; platforms for emergency response, legal aide, counselling and guidance; initiatives to make information and communication accessible; reduction of international remittance costs; financial inclusion for migrants in countries of destination; and employment facilitation for returnees. The development of the Chapter’s framework is rooted in our final commitment to implement the GCM.

When the pandemic struck and many of our migrant workers found themselves stranded on land and sea all over the world, the work that we had already been doing with international organizations and bilateral partners paid dividends. Our foreign service posts and our agencies in the capital collaborated with host governments: to provide immediate relief; to facilitate repatriation where possible, despite lockdowns and border closures; to provide recourse such as financial assistance, consular services, access to health services, testing, and treatment; and to extend temporary residence permits for those who could not be brought home.

For a developing country where remittances from migrants account for 9.3% of GDP, we know what this large-scale repatriation of migrant workers means for our economy. We are mandated by law to protect the interests of Filipinos abroad, and, as of yesterday, *(transition to slide 2 on Number of Repatriated Filipinos)* the Philippines has repatriated more than 217,000 overseas Filipinos, at the cost of more than 20 million USD. For a small country like the Philippines, these measures are costly. They are not easy to implement. They are, however, necessary to get our people to safety and to get them back home.

I would like to present our efforts *(transition to slide 3 on 5Rs)* which can be summarized into 5R's: Relief, Repatriation, Recovery, Return, and Reintegration:

1. RELIEF

The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs, through its foreign service posts, has been providing assistance to distressed overseas Filipinos in the form of financial and welfare assistance, temporary shelter, and eventually repatriation. In addition, our Department of Labor and Employment extended a one-time \$200 cash aid for overseas Filipino workers. The program has been able to provide fast, secure, and contactless financial assistance. The Philippines notes, however, the need to address wage theft among migrant workers. This refers to those who have been terminated from their jobs and are forced to return to their countries of origin without receiving their wages, dues, and benefits. The Philippines, through its foreign service posts, has been extending legal advice and assistance related to salary claims for displaced overseas Filipino workers in countries of destination whose contracts were terminated due to the pandemic.

2. REPATRIATION

Repatriation under the lens of public health consciousness is new to us, as it is for most governments. While repatriation flights have been done before to bring people home from natural disasters or situations of conflict, this is the first time the Philippines is doing it at a time of peace, and while using PPEs. The very first repatriation flight mounted by the Philippine government was for Wuhan, China when it was still the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak.

As COVID-19 gradually spread globally this year, the first wave of Filipino repatriates came from the cruise line industry (*transition to slide 4 on photos of repatriation efforts*). There are hundreds of thousands of Filipinos who work as seafarers. You can see them in the entertainment, hospitality, catering, engine, and navigational divisions onboard the cruise ships. When international borders started to close in March, the cruise line industry was heavily hit. Our embassies and consulates around the world worked tirelessly to make representations with their host governments to allow our seafarers to disembark in their country to take their onward flight to Manila. Whether a cruise ship was in the Caribbean, in North America, in Europe, in Asia, or in the Pacific Islands, the Philippine government, working hand-in-hand with the cruise line companies and the manning agencies, was able to bring home more than 72,000 of our seafarers from more than 135 cruise ships.

The Philippine government has faced all kinds of challenges in its repatriation efforts. One particular effort that comes to mind is the repatriation of our nationals in Uzbekistan where the Philippines has no embassy and honorary consulate. There was also a total lockdown at that time; thus, commercial flights were prohibited. The repatriation had to be operated remotely, with planning and coordination conducted primarily through online channels. In the end, the Philippine government was able to bring home 257 overseas Filipinos with the help of the government of Uzbekistan by giving us permit to land our chartered plane and issuing exist visas to our repatriates.

As I speak before you this today, the Philippine government has repatriated more than 217,000 overseas Filipinos from all over the world.

3. RECOVERY

(Transition to slide 5 with photos on free swab test for OFWs) Every returning Filipino is required to undergo RT-PCR testing at the airport and mandatory quarantine in a hotel facility pending the release of their negative results. If they test positive, they are brought to a strict quarantine facility or a medical facility depending on their state of health. The swab test, the hotel quarantine, and the meals of overseas Filipino workers are all free of charge. This is an inter-agency effort of the Philippine government along with the private sector, specifically the cruise line companies and manning agencies, reflective of our whole-of-nation approach.

4. RETURN

Since the Philippines is an archipelago, many returning overseas Filipinos have to fly to their final destination city. Thus, the Philippine government arranges and pays for the domestic flights of returning overseas Filipino workers after they test negative for COVID-19. To streamline the Return Phase, prior coordination is made with the local governments to alert them of the arrival and reintegration to the local communities of the repatriated Filipinos.

5. REINTEGRATION

Most of these repatriated Filipinos are eagerly waiting to get back to the workforce. As they await their deployment, whether locally or internationally, current initiatives under the Reintegration Phase include loan programs to provide working capital for start-ups, scholarship programs for dependents of returning overseas Filipino workers, financial literacy trainings, as well as cash relief assistance.

Repatriated Filipinos are also entitled to free re-skilling or up-skilling programs of the Philippine government. One such measure is the training of returning Filipinos to become contact tracers for the Philippine government. The role of contact tracers is crucial in the fight

against COVID-19. The Philippine government has also assured the continued support for returning OFWs by providing them scholarship programs that will not only improve their skills but also teach them new skills while they wait to be deployed.

Finally, it is worthy to highlight the crucial role of international assistance and cooperation during this pandemic. The Philippines appreciates the assistance of countries of destination in allowing the entry of Philippine sweeper and mercy flights into their borders. We also take this opportunity to thank countries like the Kingdom of Bahrain for providing Filipino flexi visa holders with US\$235 financial assistance during the pandemic.

While government action in the migration cycle ordinarily starts with the pre-departure phase; this was all changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It required the Philippines and the rest of the world to focus its attention on the repatriation, return, and reintegration aspects of migration.

As we responded to our distressed migrant workers through the 5R's of Relief, Repatriation, Recovery, Return, and Reintegration, the Philippines did not need to redesign the wheel. We simply had to honor our commitment to breathe life into the provisions of the GCM. We sincerely hope that other countries can join us as we believe that we could do so much more on this road we are walking, where human mobility and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals are aligned. **Thank you. (Transition to last slide)**