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From the Los Angeles Times

The Overseas Class

Millions working abroad help their nation get by, but not prosper. It's a life of lonely, risky sacrifice.

By Richard C. Paddock

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They nurse the sick in California, drive fuel trucks in Iraq, sail cargo ships through the Panama Canal and cruise ships through the Gulf of Alaska. They pour sake for Japanese salarymen and raise the children of Saudi businessmen.

They are the Philippines' most successful export: its workers.

Three decades ago, seeking sources of hard currency and an outlet for a fast-growing population, then-President Ferdinand Marcos encouraged Filipinos to find jobs in other countries. Over time, the overseas worker has become a pillar of the economy. Nine million Filipinos, more than one out of every 10, are working abroad. Every day, more than 3,100 leave the country.

Philippine workers sent home more than \$10.7 billion last year, equal to about 12% of the gross domestic product.

The current president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, calls them "the backbone of the new global workforce" and "our greatest export."

Worldwide, these workers have earned a reputation for enterprise and hard work. They include some of the Philippines' most talented people, well educated and multilingual.

But as a third generation leaves to work abroad, it is clear the system has not led to prosperity. Policymakers have focused on easing the flow of workers rather than harnessing their earnings for economic development.

Dependence on the export of people has become a formula for stagnation. Once one of the strongest in Asia, the Philippine economy now ranks near the bottom. The government invests little money in manufacturing, education or healthcare. The economy can't create even the 1.5 million jobs a year needed to keep up with population growth.

"We have a middle class, but they don't live in the Philippines," said Doris Magsaysay Ho, head of a company that dispatches 18,000 workers a year to serve on ships around the world.

Filipinos work in every country except North Korea, said Labor Secretary Patricia Santo Tomas, whose brother is a doctor in Orange County. More than 2.5 million work in the United States and nearly a million in Saudi Arabia.

The money they earn trickles into towns and villages, helping build houses, open restaurants and send children to school. But the absence of so many industrious and skilled people — mothers and fathers, engineers and entrepreneurs — exacts a heavy toll.

Across the Philippines, children are being raised by their grandparents. "Now children can buy a lot of computer games, but they don't have a mother or father, or both," Santo Tomas said.

For the sake of supporting their families, the overseas workers endure years of loneliness. Some, especially maids in the Middle East, suffer beatings and sexual abuse. In countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, they are jailed for running away. Yet the Philippines has grown so dependent on remittances that the thought of doing without them is frightening.

"Money from abroad is the only thing that keeps the economy in motion," said Ding Lichauro, former head of the country's economic planning office. "If you don't encourage the employees to go overseas, you will have revolution."

Providing sailors, maids, entertainers and other workers for a growing world market is a big business.

In this competitive arena, the Philippines has an advantage. Many Filipinos speak English. They are generally better educated than workers from countries such as Bangladesh, Sri Lanka or Indonesia. And they have a reputation for being good-natured.

An entire bureaucracy has been created around them. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration helps find jobs in other countries, encourages workers to go abroad and processes some job applications.

The Technical Education and Skills Development Agency offers free training in welding, driving heavy trucks and other skills. The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration stations diplomats around the world to look after the Philippines' foreign workers.

Those who bring or send their earnings home pay no income taxes. And the government offers returning workers low-cost equipment and tools to

help them start small businesses.

With that level of encouragement, an industry has developed to match workers and jobs.

There are more than 1,500 licensed recruiting agencies. Some provide training — six months for dancers, four months for seafarers, two weeks for housekeepers — in return for a cut of the worker's earnings.

A cook on a cargo ship can make more than Arroyo's official salary of \$1,000 a month. A bar singer in Japan can earn more than a Philippine senator. But the fees can run into the thousands of dollars; the better the job, the greater the cost.

Dozens of agencies in Manila's Ermita district attract job seekers from all over the country. Applicants line up on the streets, luggage in hand, ready to go anywhere.

Notaries sit at small wooden desks on the sidewalk. Using manual typewriters, they help workers fill out the 14 documents they are required to submit. Large copy machines on the sidewalk crank out duplicates.

Laboratories conduct blood, tuberculosis and drug tests to certify the workers' health. Nearby are cellphone shops, money changers, cheap hotels and restaurants.

Many Arab countries, with their vast oil wealth and relatively small populations, are hungry for workers.

The CDK International Manpower Services posted notices in its window seeking domestic workers and midwives in the Middle East, a gift wrapper in Dubai and a "magician balloon decorator" elsewhere in the United Arab Emirates. The agency was also recruiting workers for Burger King and Starbucks outlets in the Middle East. ("Must have fashion for coffee," the ad for Starbucks said.)

Another company operating in the Middle East wanted diesel mechanics, flower arrangers, structural engineers, wedding card designers, massage therapists, website designers, accountants and nannies.

In another neighborhood, three blocks from the U.S. Embassy, a crowded sidewalk serves as an informal hiring hall for sailors. The Philippines produces nearly 25% of the world's seafaring workers, more than any other nation.

Hundreds of would-be sailors were hanging around in the shade of the leafy narra trees as agents wandered by, holding up signs offering jobs on ships sailing from Germany, Argentina, Los Angeles or Greece. Some sought engineers and first mates for cargo ships. Others needed chefs and waiters for cruises.

A salesman offered small vials of python oil, guaranteed to cure back pain, heart disease, joint dislocation, rheumatism, cough, arthritis and skin disease.

Merchants offered CDs providing instruction on how to moor a ship, plan a voyage, speak "maritime English" and handle hazardous materials.

Freddie Vicedo spent three decades at sea, earning enough to build a house 20 miles south of Manila and send his children to school. Now past the mandatory retirement age of 50, he was seeking one last job.

"It's OK to be away if it provides you with a home and a future," he said. "It's better than living all together in poverty."

The teeming neighborhood of Antipolo in central Manila is one of the city's poorest. Thousands of families live along the railroad tracks in shanties of scrap wood and metal built one on top of the other, three stories high. Families sleep seven or eight to a room and cook over open fires between the tracks. Every month or so, someone is hit by a train.

Children play in garbage. Old women play mah-jongg on a rickety table. A woman patiently picks lice from a girl's hair.

It is not uncommon for families to hold a wake in the middle of the sweltering streets, as Danilo Paredes did for his 18-year-old daughter, Raquel. Lying in an open coffin placed on a table, she looked small for her age, but at peace amid the chaos. Paredes said he didn't know what killed her, only that he didn't have the \$25 for the medicine the doctor prescribed.

Residents look for any way out.

"I hate this place," said Mary Grace Libao, 13. She and her friend, Clarivel de los Santos, also 13, said they wanted to be singers in Japan.

"In Japan I will make enough money to buy a house for my family," Clarivel said.

Thousands of Philippine musicians and singers perform at resorts and hotels from Bali, Indonesia; to Phuket, Thailand; to Tokyo. Many young women who go abroad as entertainers end up working in the sex trade.

All over Japan, salarymen come to Philippine pubs to escape the tedium and stress of their jobs. They drink sake and sing karaoke with "japayuki," beautiful, scantily clad young women.

In Osaka, the Philippine clubs are concentrated in the crowded Dotonburi district. Many are controlled by Japanese organized crime. Customers spend as much as \$500 an evening in one of the better establishments.

Large clubs typically stage a brief show in which the women sing a few songs and dance. The rest of the time, they flirt with the customers, pouring sake, feeding them and lighting their cigarettes. They can make more in tips in an evening than they could working for a month as a salesclerk back home. They can make even more if they agree to have sex.

"The customers make offers," said Estrella Pumar, 31, who was heading from Manila to Osaka for her second tour. "It's up to the girls to decide what kind of life to live."

The women live six or seven to a room provided by their employers. If they are lucky, they get a day off every two weeks. Many aspire to marry a Japanese man and secure a residency permit. Having a child in Japan ensures residency status after a divorce, which is how 80% of these marriages end.

Wendy, 37, followed her mother to Japan in the 1990s. A brother and sister moved to Los Angeles. She spent 10 years working in pubs before marrying a Japanese man, having a son and opening her own club in Osaka, the Twin Angels.

"It's better to be here than in the Philippines," said Wendy, who declined to give her full name. But someday she'd like to return home and perhaps open a McDonald's. In the meantime, she said, "we have to survive."

The wards are overflowing at Negros Oriental Provincial Hospital, and dozens of patients lie on cots in the corridors. Some have just given birth. Others have just had surgery. Some will die in the hallway.

The hospital in Dumaguete, about 400 miles south of Manila, was built for 250 patients but usually has more than 350. Newborns stay in the same bed as their mothers; some have suffocated when their mothers rolled over in their sleep.

Patients who come here have no choice. It's the only hospital in the region they can afford. But for the doctors there is a way out: Study nursing and leave for the United States or Europe, where qualified nurses are in short supply.

Medical regulations in the U.S. and European countries typically make it very difficult for foreign doctors to work there as physicians. But nurses are in such demand that some recruiters offer bonuses of \$15,000, the equivalent of three years' pay for a doctor in Dumaguete.

Of 207 doctors in Negros Oriental province, 79 have become nurses and more than 30 are in nursing school. This hospital is supposed to have 72 doctors, but only 43 remain. The Dumaguete district has closed two of its six rural hospitals and may soon have to close a third, said Dr. Ely Villapando, the province's chief health officer.

"We are worried sick about medical doctors taking up nursing and leaving," said Villapando, 63, who also runs the hospital. "We are losing the most skilled doctors. This is a crisis in healthcare."

An aid agency gave the hospital new cardiology equipment, but it sits unused. The hospital's only cardiologist left to become an emergency-room nurse in Chicago. What she earned in a month here, she can now make before lunch.

Here, patients are so poor that some pay in produce or livestock. X-rays cost a chicken. A bunch of bananas covers consultation. Delivering a baby costs one goat.

Villapando makes the equivalent of \$437 a month. Two of his children have become nurses in the United States, one in Bakersfield and one in Texas. They send him money.

"My son already has a house of his own," he said. "He has two cars. My daughter is building a house and has two cars. They could not hope to achieve that here."

To become nurses, the doctors attend classes on weekends for a year and spend 2,200 hours as volunteer nurses at the hospital. Sometimes they do both jobs the same day.

"Some of the patients get confused," said Dr. Joyce Maningo, an internist studying to be a nurse. "They say, 'Weren't you a doctor this morning?'"

An ophthalmologist with her own practice, Dr. Eileen Marie Macia is near the top of her profession. Her father was a surgeon and a congressman. He was instrumental in building a new wing of the Dumaguete hospital. But she, too, is giving up. She is in nursing school and weighing whether it would be better to live in Tennessee or Los Angeles.

"If I go to the States, I will have to forget I am a doctor," she said as she made her nursing rounds. "I love the Philippines, but it will always be a Third World country."

Runaway maids arrive at the Philippine Embassy in Kuwait desperate, bruised, hungry and penniless. They slip out of their employers' homes in the dead of night through a window, over a wall or by walking out a door accidentally left unlocked.

They break the law simply by leaving without permission.

Some spend more than a year in the embassy compound, waiting for their passports, back pay or the resolution of their legal cases. If they step outside, they can be arrested.

At times, more than 500 women live at the offices of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration next to the embassy. The building gets so crowded that the women cannot all lie down to sleep at the same time.

"It's like a prison," said Annabelle Abing, who lived there for three months.

More than 750,000 Philippine maids work in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, where they often face legalized discrimination, beatings and sexual abuse.

The women frequently live in isolation, forbidden even to telephone their families. If they file a legal claim against their employer, they can be deported or imprisoned on trumped-up charges.

"They are treated like modern slaves," said Maita Santiago, secretary-general of Migrante International, a rights group for Philippine workers. "When workers are in distress, the government doesn't stand up for their rights for fear of the markets of foreign countries closing to Filipino workers."

Perhaps the toughest country for domestic workers is Saudi Arabia.

Sheila Marie Macatiag, 28, was earning \$12 a month at a car stereo factory in the Philippines when she decided to take a job in Saudi Arabia to support her parents and six younger siblings.

Macatiag said she was forced to work from 5 a.m. to midnight, verbally abused for the smallest mistake and never given enough to eat. During her first six months, her employers paid her a total of \$200; she had paid \$300 to an employment agency in the Philippines to get the job.

Fed up, she ran away to the employment agency's local office. But by the time she got there, her employers had already complained that she had stolen money and watches from their vault. Police came and arrested her.

Despite the absence of evidence or witnesses, she spent 13 months in jail, Macatiag said.

"They told me they were going to cut off my hand or I would be sentenced to 108 years or I would die in prison," she said. "Even during trial they told me my hand would be cut off unless I admitted to the allegations."

She maintained that she was innocent, but a Saudi court convicted her and she received five lashes on the hand with a cane. She has returned to the Philippines but doesn't expect to find a job.

"There are so many people here and so few jobs," Macatiag said. She is hoping to leave the country again: "Anywhere but the Middle East," she said.

Even if there is no abuse, the emotional toll of being away from home can be heavy.

In Hong Kong, Philippine maids gather by the thousands in the city center every Sunday to spend their day off together. They fill the parks and sidewalks and overflow into the streets. Sitting on cardboard or sheets of plastic, they hold prayer meetings, play cards and have picnics.

Beneath the festivity is a sense of melancholy. These women spend the best years of their lives serving others.

Many leave their children behind so they can earn enough to pay for their schooling. Others forgo the chance to marry in order to provide for parents and siblings. Most make the equivalent of \$420 a month and send more than half of it home.

Editha Ycon, 37, has worked 13 of the last 17 years in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan and now Hong Kong. She has a degree in computer programming but could not find work in the Philippines. She has left her son twice to go overseas, first when he was 6 months old and again when he was 4 years old. He is now 10.

"I want to stay with my son," she said. "I want to prepare his breakfast before he goes to school. I want to pack his things. I am a mother, but not really. I haven't been a mother yet."

The people of Santa Rosa, a village two hours south of Manila, once made a living processing coconuts. But the men who worked in the drying sheds left the country long ago.

Now the village is known as Little Italy. It depends almost entirely on remittances from abroad. Of its 8,000 people, 3,000 work overseas, mainly in Italy and Spain. Left behind are children, the elderly and the disabled.

Overseas workers contributed money to build the two-story village office. A worker in Spain donated the village computer. Others helped buy an ambulance. But the village is distinguished by the more than 600 large Italian-style houses built with money sent home from overseas.

Village head Benito Alvarez, who wears a USA T-shirt given to him by cousins in America, said the owners were unlikely ever to live in them. "They build the house to prove to the people they grew up with that they are a big success," he said.

But what Alvarez sees as evidence of waste and opulence gives another villager a deep sense of satisfaction.

Carlito Villanueva, 67, began sending his children to Spain and Italy in 1985. Now all nine of them live in Europe, along with their spouses and his 14 grandchildren.

"If they had not gone, I could only see hardship for them, because life here is very difficult," he said. "I'm not sad at all. I'm very happy. As a parent,

my major goal is to secure a good life for them."

Each of the children is sending money to build a house in the family compound. Four have been built, and a fifth is planned. All are unoccupied, except on the rare occasion when one of the children comes home for a visit.

"This is their home," he said. "Wherever they are in the world, even though they are scattered, they will come home to me."

Another neighbor, Digna Escueta, 28, hadn't been home since she left to work as a maid in Padua, Italy, six years earlier. She came back for two weeks to try to straighten out a domestic nightmare: Her husband was in prison for drug use, and her daughter was out of control.

Her parents worked overseas when she was growing up, starting with her mother when Escueta was 11. A brother and sister followed. Altogether, more than 50 relatives found work in Italy.

Escueta married as a teenager and soon had a baby. Her husband became addicted to methamphetamine.

"We grew up making our own decisions, and because of that we married young," she said. "Some children of overseas workers in this barrio fall into vice and lose direction in life."

When Escueta turned 22, she also went overseas, leaving her 1-year-old daughter, Yvonne, with a cousin.

Seeing her daughter for the first time in six years was not the reunion she was hoping for. Yvonne had become the terror of the neighborhood.

She slugged the boys when her mother's back was turned, making them cry. She killed kittens by hugging them to death, stepping on them or locking them in a closet, Escueta said. She killed a puppy by tying a string around its neck and letting it fall off a high bed.

"She loves them to death," her mother said.

Escueta acknowledged that the absence of so many parents meant troubles for the next generation of Filipinos.

"Going abroad has two sides," she said. "The bad side is the separation of the family. The children grow up without a mother's supervision. Sometimes they go astray. The good side is not just the income but the possibility the whole family could go overseas, which is my dream."

Angelo de la Cruz, a father of eight, was desperate. He needed to pay medical bills for a son who lost an eye in an accident and care for another who has Down syndrome.

He decided to leave his one-room bamboo hut two hours north of Manila and return to Saudi Arabia, where he'd worked three times. He left as a truck driver. He returned as a national symbol.

In July 2004, De la Cruz was ordered to deliver gasoline to U.S. troops in Iraq. He became separated from other trucks in the convoy and was abducted four hours after crossing the border.

His kidnappers demanded that the Philippines withdraw its contingent of 51 troops from the U.S.-led coalition. He expected to be beheaded. But with a narrow election victory behind her, President Arroyo could not risk offending the huge constituency of overseas workers and their families. She withdrew the Philippine troops a month ahead of schedule.

De la Cruz was freed after two weeks.

On his return home, he was showered with gifts: a new three-room house, a new motorcycle, a new job, a glass eye for his son and scholarships for his children.

"They kept saying I was a hero," he said. "I felt like I was just an ordinary person. Many say that I am a symbol of the Philippines. To this day, I keep wondering what it is I have become."

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Paddock reported from the Philippines, Hong Kong, Japan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Singapore and Thailand.

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Saturday

Kenya: Benta Wauna worked abroad to give her sister alternatives to arranged marriage and extreme poverty.

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Statistical snapshot of the Philippines

Key facts, based on the most recent figures available.

Population

estimate

88 million

GDP,

per person

\$5,100

Percent living

in poverty

30%

Remittance

income annually

\$10.7 billion

Sources: CIA World Factbook, World Bank, Philippine Department of Labor, Times reporting. Compiled by John L. Jackson

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