

# **The Arab Spring and the Evacuation of Overseas Filipino Workers**

**A Note on Assistance to Nationals in Riyadh PE<sup>1</sup>**

## **Introduction**

The year was 2011. It all started with a seemingly regular bit of news reported in CNN and Al Jazeera and other TV news stations – a Tunisian vendor burned himself to death in protest of the maltreatment he suffered from the police authorities on January 4. As the death of the man became public, over 5,000 Tunisians took to the streets to demand better living conditions, protest police brutality and denounce corruption in the country.

The wildfire-like spread of the political turmoil to other Middle Eastern and Northern African countries took the world by surprise. Citizens after citizens launched protests and demonstrations against their governments in more than a dozen Arab countries, later known as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring resulted in the violent change of rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Civil uprisings have erupted in Bahrain and Syria (still ongoing), major protests broken out in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Oman while minor protests occurred in Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Western Sahara.

A month after the political tumult in Tunisia, a day of revolt was organized in Libya to protest the regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The response from Gaddafi was quick and brutal. Mercenaries and even armed prisoners were deployed with orders to clear the streets of demonstrators. As the chaos engulfed the nation, OFWs in different parts of

---

<sup>1</sup> This caselet, written by Brenda B. Furagganan, MDM under the supervision of Prof. Federico M. Macaranas, and was commissioned by Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) for the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) as part of the study on the Zero-Based Budget (ZBB) Management of the Department of Foreign Affairs, with particular focus on the operations of the Foreign Service Posts (FSPs).

Libya, numbering more or less 30,000, began their mass exodus out of their host in an effort to return to the Philippines. The sea changing work of the Foreign Service Posts and the Attachés loomed amidst the impending Libyan revolution.

## OFWs in the Middle East and the Libyan Exodus

For the Philippines and the Posts, the Arab Spring was not simply another bit of tragic global news. The Middle East is home to the highest number of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) although the Americas have the highest number of Filipino migrants or Overseas Filipinos (OFs) (Table 1).

**Table 1. Overseas Filipinos (OFs)/Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in all Posts**

	Jan-Jun2006	Jul-Dec2006	Jul-Dec2008	Jan-Jun2009	Jul-Dec2010	Jan-Jun2011
Americas	4,089,989	4,076,397	3,398,787	3,364,574	4,176,403	3,693,144
Asia and Pacific	1,276,497	1,303,198	1,264,918	1,309,529	1,675,507	1,889,155
Europe	536,158	547,937	569,650	644,076	715,627	749,000
Middle East and Africa	1,519,694	1,525,429	1,975,501	2,480,236	2,868,209	1,786,735
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,422,338</b>	<b>7,452,961</b>	<b>7,208,856</b>	<b>7,798,415</b>	<b>9,435,746</b>	<b>8,118,034</b>
% of OFWs in Middle East	20%	20%	27%	32%	30%	22%

Source: Report to Conaress, various years

At the end of 2010, there were 2,868,209 OFWs working in various Middle East and African countries. Over 90% of the total OFWs can be found in only four countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar (Table 2).

**Table 2. OFWs in the Selected Middle East Countries, 2010**

Country	Post	Total OFWs	%
Saudi Arabia	Riyadh PE	1,576,241	60
	Jeddah PCG	280,000	11
United Arab Emirates	Abu Dhabi PE	136,977	5
	Dubai PCG	246,671	9
Kuwait	Kuwait PE	170,000	6
Qatar	Doha PE	200,000	8
Libya	Tripoli PE	29,823	1

Source: Report to Congress, July – December 2010

The gravity of the Libyan OFW exodus was felt heavily at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). DFA Secretary Alberto Del Rosario flew to Tripoli, Libya on his first day on the job as Department Secretary to personally oversee the repatriation operations

to evacuate Filipino nationals.<sup>2</sup> The repatriation of the OFWs involved commissioning private vans and buses as well as Greek-owned ferries to get the OFWs out to borders where they can safely take the flight back to the Philippines. It also required negotiating with the border authorities to allow the OFWs to cross especially OFWs whose documents were left in their homes or offices.

Apart from the Tripoli PE staff, personnel from nearby Embassies and Consulates General were mobilized by the DFA to assist Filipinos who were transiting to other Middle East or African countries on their way to the Philippines. There were only 11 personnel at the Tripoli PE and most of them were handling Consular and Administrative Services. Other Attachés also helped in bring the OFWs trapped in the crossfire to safety.

Meanwhile, the Filipinos back home held their breath as they witness scores of hundreds of OFWs in desperate situations. Despite its efforts, several labor groups primarily Migrante International criticized the government for its slow and inept way of handling the evacuation of the OFWs in Libya.

### **Assisting Filipino Nationals in Riyadh**

As of January 31, 2012, the Philippines maintains 94 Foreign Service Posts (FSPs) around the world. Thirty Posts are located in the Asia Pacific, 27 in Europe, 19 in the Middle East and Africa, and 18 in the Americas.<sup>3</sup> The Riyadh PE is one of the 19 FSPs under the geographic area of the Middle East and Africa.

Saudi Arabia was not insulated from the political unrests that swept across the Middle East. On March 11 of the Arab Spring year, the Saudi government quelled a day of protest with heavy police presence in Riyadh. Saudi troops along with forces from the United Arab Emirates also moved to Bahrain to help control the protests there and effectively prevent it from spreading to the Kingdom. For now the turmoil is contained. However, many political analysts claim that the Kingdom still has the ingredients for civil unrest: having a young population, an unemployment rate of 10 per cent, rising inflation, and growing wealth disparity.

#### Serving the OFWs in Riyadh

---

<sup>2</sup> Manila Bulletin. "550 OFWs evacuated to Tunisia by Foreign Secretary Alberto Del Rosario." <http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/306686/550-ofws-evacuated-tunisia-foreign-secretary-alberto-del-rosario> Feb 28, 2011

<sup>3</sup> OPAS. 2012. Actual and Approved Staffing Patterns of Foreign Service Posts. DFA

In terms of tourism, trade and investment, Riyadh PE ranks low in terms of contribution to tourism as tourist arrivals from Riyadh to the Philippines is negligible, representing 1% (22,214) of total tourist arrivals in the country (Table 1). Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) is even more insignificant at 0.1% (Php179.44 million) when compared with the total of all posts. In addition, the balance of trade (Exports less Imports) with Riyadh is negative, even higher than the average of all Posts.

**Table 3. Economic Statistics for Riyadh PE vis-à-vis All Posts**

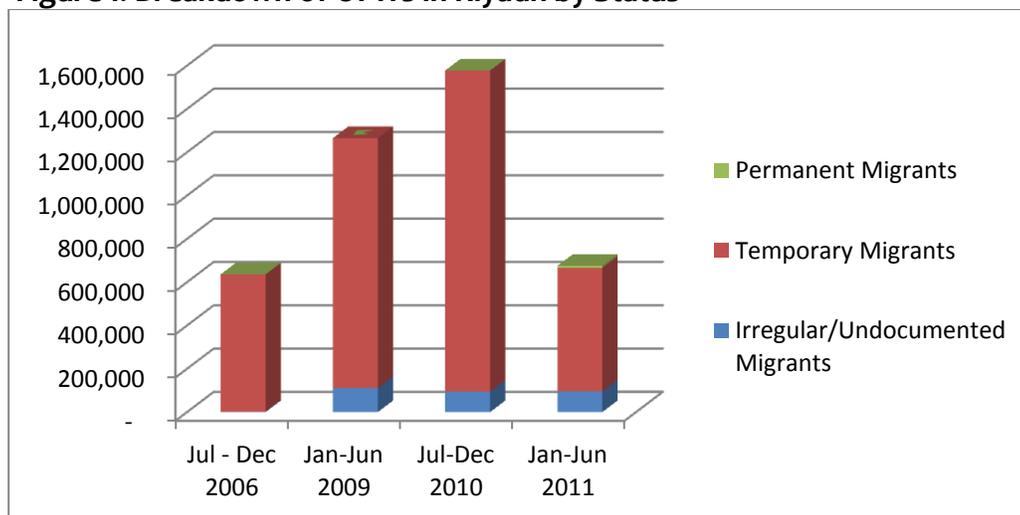
	Total Posts	Riyadh PE	%
Tourist Arrivals in the Philippines	3,121,127	22,214	1%
Total Philippine Exports (in US\$)	49,694,545,879	72,520,346	0%
Total Imports (in US\$)	51,839,941,363	2,407,797,514	5%
Total Trade (in US\$)	101,534,487,242	2,480,317,860	2%
Balance of Trade (in US\$)	(2,145,395,484)	(2,335,277,168)	
Foreign Direct Investments (in Million PhP)	193,017	179.44	0.1%

Source: DFA document titled Annex I

Yet in terms of employment promotion or facilitation, Riyadh PE is at the top spot. From 2006 to 2010, the number of OFWs in Riyadh increased from 636,350 to 1,576,241 warm bodies (see Table 1). The increase in employment opportunities of Filipinos in Riyadh can be partly attributed to the work of the Posts, including the POLOs.

The Riyadh PE serves three segments of the labor force namely: permanent migrants; temporary migrants or OFWs; and irregular or undocumented migrants. From 2006 to 2011, the number of Filipino permanent migrants in Riyadh is tiny compared to other Posts (Figure 1). Of the 9,000 permanent migrants recorded in 2011, 56 percent are males. Temporary migrants or OFWs comprise the bulk of Filipinos in Riyadh; increasing from 634,100 in 2006; 1,154,668 in 2009; 1,483,485 in 2010; and only 570,892 in 2011.

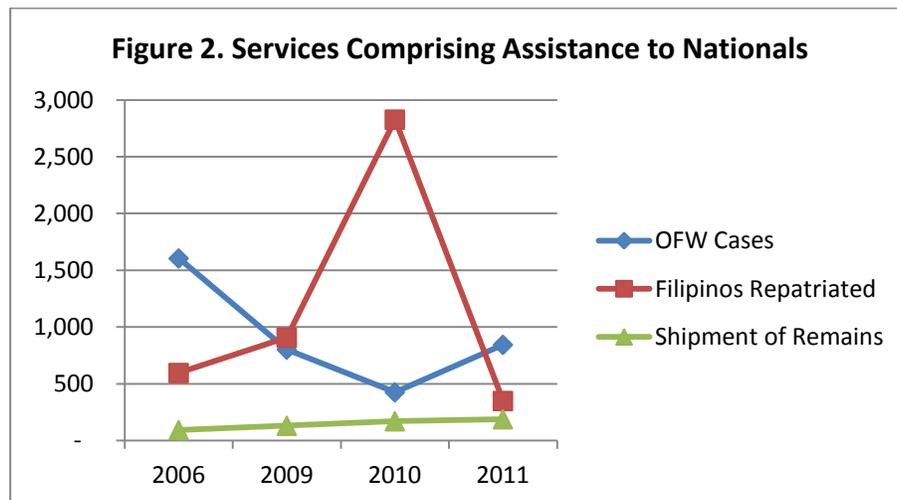
**Figure 1. Breakdown of OFWs in Riyadh by Status**



Source: DFA Report to Congress, various years

Because of the large population of migrant Filipino workers in Riyadh, it is inevitable that the bulk of the work of the Embassy focus on Assistance to Nationals (ATN). Services provided by the Post comprising ATN include repatriation, shipment of remains, medical (hospitalization) and psychological interventions, establishing the whereabouts of OFWs, among other services. It also includes legal assistance such as the payment of fees for foreign lawyers, bail bonds, court fees, charges and other litigation expenses.

In 2006, the number of OFWs with cases that were assisted by the Post totaled 1,605, 45% of these are females (Figure 2). This number decreased to 426 in 2010 before doubling in 2011.



In addition, ATN services include facilitating the repatriation of Filipinos and shipment of remains of Filipinos who died in Saudi Arabia. In 2006, 596 OFWs were repatriated but this declined to 349 in 2011. The number of Filipinos repatriated spiked in 2010 due to the political tensions in the host country that year. The number of OFWs whose remains were shipped shows an increasing trend from 93 in 2006 to 189 in 2011.

#### Riyadh PE Resources: Inputs

The resource inputs used by the Riyadh PE to produce its outputs and outcomes are many (such as ideas, people, money, physical facilities, among others). Two key resources are highlighted: human resources and budget.

Currently, there are a total of 48 personnel in the Riyadh PE: 45 Attaché Foreign Service Officers; 33 staff; and 10 local hires. The majority of the personnel are engaged in

the Consular and Administrative Section of the Embassy and only one or two personnel actually engage the OFWs in their more serious needs.

In addition to the DFA personnel, there are nine government agencies with representatives posted at the Embassy namely: Labor Attaché, POLO Riyadh; Labor Attaché, POLO Eastern Region; SSS Representative; Pag-Ibig Fund Representative; Social Welfare Attaché; Welfare Office, POLO CRO; Trade Representative; Welfare Officer; and Administrative Officer.

#### Riyadh PE Budget

To undertake their work, the Riyadh PE gets 2% of total budget of all embassies and PCGs (Table 4). This share has remained the same in 2009 and 2010 despite a significant increase in the number of OFWs being served by the Post by 25% during the same year covered (additional of 311,051 from 2009 to 2010).

**Table 4. Budget of All Embassies, PCGs and Riyadh PE, 2009 - 2010**

	2009			2010		
	All Embassies	All PCGs	Riyadh Embassy	All Embassies	All PCGs	Riyadh Embassy
Personnel Services	3,139,818,000	1,242,480,000	116,876,000	3,242,293,000	1,273,100,000	117,785,000
MOOE	1,018,415,000	448,750,000	18,862,000	1,195,080,000	518,012,000	26,082,000
Capital Outlay	85,326,000	44,156,000		56,050,000	18,800,000	

Source: GAA 2009 and 2010

Eighty-six percent of the budget allocation from GAA in 2009 was for personnel services (82% in 2010) (Table 5). The bulk of this allocation (58%) goes to Overseas Allowance and Living Quarters Allowance (28.9%). Only 11% of budget allocation goes to MOOE and there was no budget for capital outlay in both years.

**Table 5. Breakdown of Riyadh PE Budget Allocation, 2007**

	Share in Total Allocation
<b>Personnel Services</b>	<b>85.7%</b>
Itemized Position	2.1%
Additional Compensation	0.3%
Alien/Casual/Contractual Personnel	5.3%
Clothing Allowance	0.6%
Christmas Bonus and Cash Gift	0.9%
Productivity Incentive	0.1%
Post Allowance	0.6%
Overseas Allowance	57.9%
Family Allowance	2.1%
Educational Allowance	1.2%
Living Quarters Allowance	28.9%
<b>Operating Expenses</b>	<b>10.9%</b>
<b>Rentals</b>	<b>2.1%</b>

**Representation Expenses**

1.2%

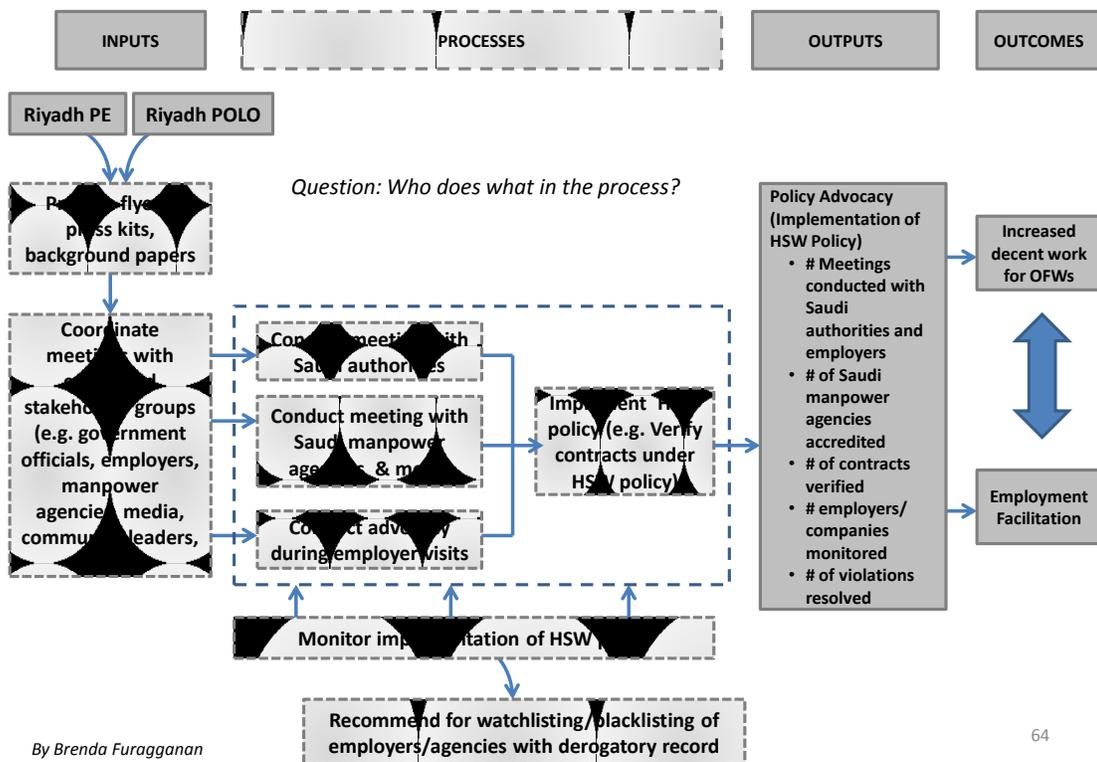
Source of basic data: Riyadh 2007 Annual Report

Consular services also constitute Assistance to Nationals. These services include passport services (e.g. issuance, renewal, amendment), authentication of documents, Notarial/Authentication Services and other Miscellaneous Services such as registration for elections, marriages, and registration of births. Riyadh PE is the number one post in terms of issuances of passports issuing about 8% (34,401) of passports issued in all posts.

**Serving the OFWs in Riyadh: To What Outcomes?**

The process serving OFWs in Riyadh is illustrated in Figure 3, citing as an example the work on Policy Advocacy. Figure 3 shows how the inputs provided by the Riyadh PE and Riyadh POLO enables them to perform various activities (processes) to produce outputs, which eventually results to positive outcomes. What is not clear in this process flow is: *What Agency does What?*

**Figure 3. Sample Process Flow for Policy Advocacy on HSW**  
**Sample Assistance to Nationals (ATN): Policy Advocacy**



Riyadh PE and Riyadh POLO undertakes separate or joint activities to promote the HSW policy and all their efforts lead to the outputs and outcomes. While it is easy to identify the outputs of the respective activities, it is not easy to determine, which agency should be credited for the resulting outcomes. This is the difficulty in assessing the performance of the Posts.

Beyond the outputs that are normally tracked by the Department of Foreign Affairs, the outcomes of the concerted efforts of the Riyadh PE as well as other Posts, are highlighted in terms of the following:

#### Marketing of Higher Skilled Filipino Workers

Professional and skilled workers get higher salaries, work in better working conditions (compared to non-skilled and domestic workers) and are involved in lesser cases. To market professional and skilled workers, strong policy advocacy and labor promotions are required, which is one of the outcomes of the activities of the Riyadh PE and Riyadh POLO (Figure 3).

In 2006, there were more OFWs in Riyadh working as domestic workers (33%) rather than professionals (14%) and although 52% of OFWs were highly skilled workers, there were no OFWs working as semi-skilled workers and laborers. By 2010, the composition of OFWs in Riyadh shifted to reflect the better labor policy on HSWs. The share of professionals increased to 21% while that of domestic workers declined to 14%. The decrease in highly skilled workers, however, was replaced by semi-skilled workers (21%) and laborers (11%).

While there may be several factors contributing to this shift, the opening of more employment opportunities for Filipino skilled workers and decrease in deployment of domestic workers may be one of the benefits derived from the policy advocacy and employment promotion undertaken by the Posts.

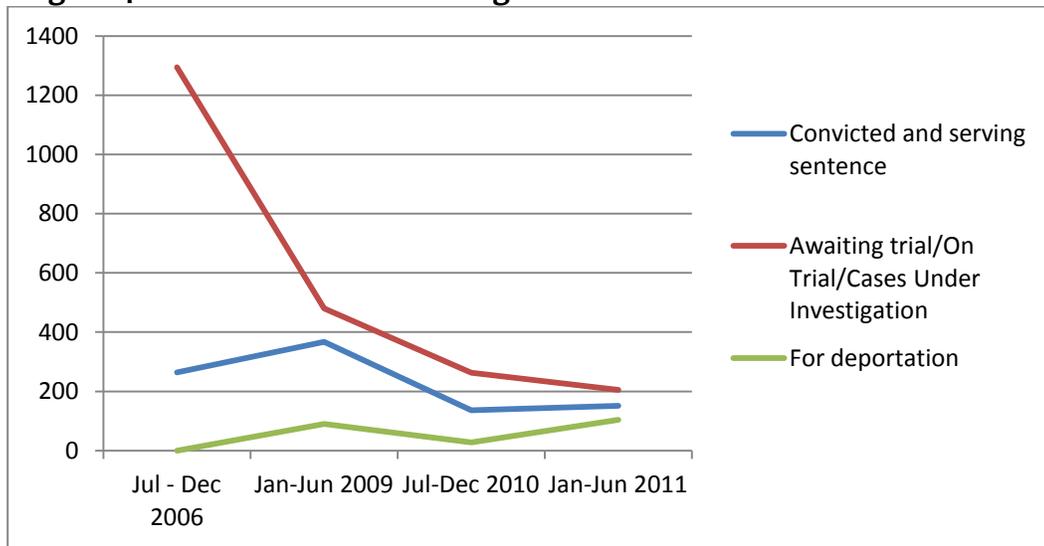
In addition, higher OFW remittances result out of the shift to more professional and skilled worker in Riyadh. In 2010, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas reported that remittances from Saudia Arabia amounted to some US\$1.544 billion or around 8.2% of the cumulative US\$18.763 billion in remittances sent home by all OFWs around the globe. The OFWs in Saudi Arabia is the one of three groups of Filipinos overseas with remittances exceeding \$1 billion, the other two being the Filipinos in the United States and Canada (\$7.862 billion and \$2.022 billion, respectively in 2010). The increase in remittances may also be the benefit arising from deploying more professional and skilled workers that earn higher salaries.

## Declining Number of OFWs in Distress

Another benefit derived from the activities at the Post is the decline in the number of OFWs with cases in the Saudi courts. This is one of the most critical Assistance to Nationals service provided to OFWs i.e. assisting them in with their legal cases through provision of local lawyers, facilitating bail, among other legal services.

The number of OFWs convicted and serving sentence increased from 264 in 2006 to 367 in 2009 before decreasing to 151 by 2011 (Figure 4). The number of OFWs with cases declined from 1,294 in 2006 to 205 in 2011.

**Figure 4. Number of OFWs with Legal Cases**



## **Conclusion**

It is clear that providing assistance to nationals is not the sole responsibility of the Riyadh Philippine Embassy. A number of Attachés also stationed in the post serve the OFWs. The challenge for the Post and all the Attachés in the current set is determining how to attribute the benefits derived in order to rationalize their respective operationalize budgets.

Outside of a comprehensive value chain study of the Post activities, determining the benefits derived from having Posts is difficult to identify. In addition, outcomes are intangible and some activities cannot be divided or clearly delineated, and they take a longer duration to be realized. Clearly a better set of criteria for assessing the benefits and relevance of posts is urgently needed to justify the allocation of scarce public resources.