

domestic helpers," says the agency's Banawis. In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are second-class citizens who cannot legally drive. The Filipinas are not even considered workers because Saudi labor laws explicitly exempt domestic servants, leaving them without any legal protection or recourse.

"To prepare women workers for the conditions of their jobs, for the difficulties they might encounter with a different culture and the exclusion of labor laws, we offer pre-departure seminars, especially for the domestic helpers," says Banawis.

Nonetheless, although these workers are a mainstay of the Philippine economy, the government does little to actually protect them. According to Kaibigan, the Philippines has failed to ratify conventions with other countries that could shield its workers, leaving not one labor agreement with another country that could protect Filipino workers there.

"Aquino calls the overseas workers our unsung heroes," says Santa Ana, "but despite what they have contributed, they haven't been well-protected. And they need to be."

#### Deserted in the desert

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, an unknown number of Filipinos were trapped there — estimates range from 40,000 to 60,000. In the chaos that followed, they received little official assistance.

The Philippine Embassy in Kuwait City was closed the first day after the invasion, for example. Its staff had fled the country. But even when it reopened, the overseas workers had to rely on their own resources to escape. Without organized transportation, people took abandoned vehicles or paid to be ferried out. During the dangerous trip through the desert, they passed through military checkpoints—one woman counted 24—and often had to sell their belongings for food and water. In the refugee camps, they waited for weeks until they could get a flight out. About 30,000 people returned home this way.

The Philippine government played a minimal role. It hesitated to evacuate the workers, responding with what several observers tactfully called "ambivalence." Using funds from the Overseas Workers'

Welfare Administration, it eventually paid for the flights of about 10,000. But the International Office for Migration (IOM) shouldered the rest, together with the Philippine Airlines and governments of other countries.

About three-fourths of the returned workers are single women in their 20s and early 30s, primarily domestic helpers. Many of them, isolated in their homes, could not get information about the war or their options of returning home. Some were taken back by employers to Saudi Arabia or Europe, and others were held back by employers who asked them to stay — or took away their visas and passports.

An unknown number were raped by Iraqi soldiers and fellow refugees. Many observers claim that the government showed particular insensitivity to the women workers. Foreign Secretary Raul Manglapus was widely quoted in the Philippine press for questioning reports that Filipina workers had been raped, quipping that if rape is inevitable, women should relax and enjoy it.

Today, workers like Maria and Lilanie remain jobless. The economy, weakened by a drought, typhoon, and major earthquake within a single year, has no work for them. Neither one of them can afford the placement fee that could buy jobs abroad, but they see returning overseas as their only chance to support themselves. Maria will work overseas again "if God's willing," she says. Lilanie wants to return to Kuwait.

She very likely will have the chance. Unwilling to abandon its strict schedule of debt repayments, the Philippine government remains as desperate as ever for foreign exchange. It fully intends to seize the next opportunity and help rebuild Kuwait. Job orders, says the POEA's Banawis, have already come in. "We're pinning our hopes on that work."

## Implications of migrant labor studied

**W**hile the governments in the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia continue to routinely export their labor, a regional group of organizations in Hongkong, Malaysia and the Philippines is trying to learn what this labor trade means to the workers and their families.

"Our goal is to develop a data base about overseas workers: why they go, what problems they encounter, what services and advocacy they need," Lucia Pavia-Ticzon, director of the Manila-based Women's Resource and Research Center, which offers feminist training and education in projects throughout the country.

Together with the Center for Women's Resources, Kaibigan and Kanlungan, the WRRC is studying migrant labor in three communities in the Philippines.

Earlier this year, a team of WRRC researchers spent over a month conducting interviews in Tuding in the province of Benguet, where the recent decline in gold mining has left countless families without a way to support themselves. The research, which focuses on women who work as domestic helpers, is looking at 150 families of prospective workers, returned workers, and women currently employed abroad.

The findings are still being analyzed, said Rosanna Fronteras, a WRRC project researcher. But the effects of overseas work are clear to her.

"The women go because they reason that no matter how painful it will be, they're willing to make the sacrifice so they can feed their children and send them to school," she says. "But the children are unhappy, not inspired in school. Most of the husbands we talked with couldn't manage their lives without their wives and drank too much. Migrant labor destroys people's lives. It destroys the family and the future of the children."