



DIALOGUE. Officials of the Philippine Embassy in Washington, D.C. and leaders of the Filipino Workers Campaign discuss the situation of Filipino offshore oil workers in March 2013. In attendance during the meeting are First Secretary and Consul General Vries and Assistant Labor Officer Oliver Flores with Dante Simbulan and Jojo Peace, Justice and Human Rights in the Philippines and Katrina Abarcar from the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns. *(Philippine Embassy Photo)*

21 March 2013 - The Philippine Embassy met on Monday, March 18, with leaders of migrant

rights organizations supporting a group of Filipino offshore oil workers in Louisiana involved in a class suit against their employer for alleged slavery and human trafficking.

In a statement, the Embassy said officials sat down with leaders of the Justice for Grand Isle Shipyard Filipino Workers Campaign to listen to their demands and, at the same time, convey the Philippine Government's position on the case filed by close to 100 of an estimated 300 Filipino offshore oil workers employed by Grand Isle Shipyard and D&R Resources.

"The Embassy is satisfied with the outcome of the discussions," said First Secretary and Consul Elmer Cato who along with Welfare Officer Saul de Vries and Assistant Labor Officer Oliver Flores represented the Embassy in the first meeting with supporters of the workers since the groups launched their solidarity campaign in January.

The Justice for Grand Isle Shipyard Campaign was represented in the dialogue by Dante Simbulan and Josef Cadgugay of the Katarungan Center for Peace, Justice and Human Rights in the Philippines and Katrina Abarcar and Ann Beryl Corotan of Philippine Forum and the National Alliance for Filipino Concerns.

"The Embassy actually shares their concern for the rights and welfare of Filipino offshore oil workers here in the United States—not just those involved in the class suit against Grand Isle but also the majority who have not joined the case," said Cato, who is the Embassy's spokesperson.

The offer to dialogue was made after 10 protesters from New York, Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey staged a picket outside the Embassy along Massachusetts Avenue in support of the Filipino offshore oil workers involved in the case who they insist were victims of human trafficking and modern-day slavery.

The groups want the Philippine Government to investigate the condition of the other group of Filipino workers who, according to them, were being treated like slaves and kept in prison-like conditions in the Grand Isle facility in Galiano, Louisiana.

They also want the Philippine Government to shut down the companies for alleged illegal, inhumane and negligent business practices and for Philippine Ambassador to the United States Jose L. Cuisia Jr. to step down for supposedly failing to take any action on the case.

“We hope the Embassy was able to present a clear picture of what the Philippine Government has done and what it continues to do in protecting the rights and welfare of our workers,” said Cato, who enumerated the actions the Embassy undertook in connection with the Grand Isle Shipyard case and the 16 November 2012 explosion in the Gulf of Mexico that left three Filipinos dead and three others seriously injured.

In its statement, the Embassy said that unknown to the public, it actually helped shoulder the cost of recovering two of the first eight (8) workers who left the Grand Isle facility in 2010 and that it had even offered other possible assistance to the workers through the Philippine Overseas Labor Office. The Embassy said it continued to actively monitor the case even though it never received any request for assistance from the workers or their lawyers either before or after they went to court.

The Embassy also said it played a critical role in the aftermath of the Black Elk offshore platform fire by immediately deploying personnel to assist the victims and their families who had to be flown in from the Philippines. Ambassador Cuisia, who assumed in 2011, flew to New Orleans and Baton Rouge twice to look into the condition not just of the victims but also the other Filipino employees of the company.

The Embassy said Ambassador Cuisia also banked on the goodwill he was able to establish with the US Department of Labor during the past two years to request the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to look into the living conditions of the remaining Filipino workers at the Grand Isle facility in Galiano.

It was also Ambassador Cuisia who made representations with the Department of Interior to assure the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement that the Filipino workers will give their full cooperation in connection with their investigation of the Black Elk platform accident.

“It was also Ambassador Cuisia who protested and obtained an apology from Black Elk President John Hoffman for the statement the oil executive had given to media attributing the

platform accident to the incompetence and lack of English language skills of Filipino offshore oil workers," the Embassy said.

During the meeting, the Embassy suggested to protest leaders that their demand that the Philippine Government shuts down Grand Isle Shipyard could be better addressed if they redirect their call to the US Government which has the power to do so.

The Embassy said it is waiting for the results of the visit of a consular team that was dispatched to Louisiana last week to meet with US authorities and to again look into the condition of the injured Filipinos and their families and other workers there. END