

PRESS RELEASE

PHILIPPINE EMBASSIES IN BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS STEP UP EFFORTS TO EVACUATE OFWs FROM SYRIA



PHOTOS:
FIRST ROW LEFT – Vice Consul Dennis John Briones (in white shirt) with CLMC staff at Lebanese immigration in Masna'a border while sorting the passports and travel documents of the 92 OFWs from Syria who entered Lebanon on 05 September 2013; **FIRST ROW CENTRE** – The 45 OFWs who stayed for 6 days at the Caritas shelter line up at the Rafik Hariri International Airport to depart Lebanon on in the early evening of 05 September 2013; **FIRST ROW RIGHT** – ATN officer Junaid Ali briefs the 50 OFWs upon arrival at the Philippine Embassy in Hadath; **SECOND ROW LEFT** – Cultural Officer Gladys Perey and MWOFRCHouseparent Gina Murillo distribute food to the 50 OFWs; **SECOND ROW CENTRE** – Welfare Officer Imelda Gatinao (left) and Collecting Officer Lilia Pangilinan (middle) assist and lead the 41 OFWs who traveled from the Masna'a border to the CLMC shelter in Mount Lebanon; **SECOND ROW RIGHT** – ATN officer Dexter Macaraeg assists the 50 OFWs at the Etihad check-in counter at the Rafik Hariri International Airport in the early morning of 06 September 2013.

06 September 2013 – In compliance with the directive of Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario to step up efforts to bring Filipinos from Syria out of harm's way, the Philippine Embassy in Beirut conducted simultaneous and successive operations within a 24-hour period to transfer them into Lebanon, deliver some of them to the Caritas shelter to await the booking of their flights and assist those who already had flight reservations to leave the country on their way home to the Philippines.

In the morning of 05 September 2013, the Embassy sent a team to the Masna'a border, 62 kilometers away from Beirut, composed of Vice Consul Dennis Briones and Information Officer Edwin Batallones, to receive a new batch of ninety-two (92) OFWs from the Philippine Embassy in Damascus and facilitate their entry into Lebanon. The 92 OFWs left the Masna'a border in four buses after completing entry procedures.

Another team composed of Vice Consul Rona Beth Goce and ATN Officer Dexter Macaraeg travelled 50 kilometers towards the Caritas Lebanon Migrant Center (CLMC) shelter in Mount Lebanon to collect the forty-five (45) OFWs who crossed to Lebanon from Syria last August 30 and bring them to the Rafik Hariri International Airport for their flight leaving Beirut at 6:30 p.m. of that day, via Qatar Airways flight QR425. The 45 OFWs were in high spirits and eager to go home to the Philippines after staying for six days in the Caritas Shelter. One of the 92 OFWs who arrived from Syria that day was escorted by OWWA staff Joselito Sunga from the border direct to the airport where she joined the 45 OFWs under the care of Vice Consul Goce and Mr. Macaraeg.

From the Masna'a border, Mr. Batallones, together with two Caritas personnel, escorted two buses carrying 41 OFWs to the Caritas shelter that had just been vacated by their *kababayans*, and were turned over to the care and management of the Shelter Team composed of OWWA Welfare Officer Imelda Gatinao, Embassy Collecting Officer Lilia Pangilinan and Damascus PE local hire Alma Balili. Ambassador Leah Basinang-Ruiz, accompanied by her spouse Ricardo Ruiz, had earlier arrived at the shelter to check once more the security and other logistical arrangements for the incoming OFWs and also received the report of the outgoing Shelter Team composed of Property Officer Chloe Silverio and Consular Assistant Melissa Mancenido.

Also from the Masna'a border, Vice Consul Briones escorted another two buses carrying 50 OFWs to the Philippine Embassy in Hadath, Baabda and turned them over to the Shelter Team composed of Cultural Officer Gladys Perey, ATN Officer Junaid Ali and MOWFRC houseparent Gina Murillo, who briefed them on the house rules and later on offered them a hot dinner prepared by Ms. Gladys Perey and Ms. Murillo. Ambassador Ruiz and her spouse, who had returned to the Embassy from the Caritas shelter in Mount Lebanon, also visited the 50 OFWs to wish them a safe journey home to the Philippines as well as a happy reunion with their families.

Just before midnight, Vice Consul Briones and ATN Officer Dexter Macaraeg arrived at the Embassy to escort the 50 OFWs to the Rafik Hariri International Airport and assist them in going through the security, check-in, immigration and boarding procedures for their Etihad Airways flight EY534 leaving Beirut at 4:10 in the morning of 06 September 2013.

Ambassador Ruiz expressed satisfaction at the utmost cooperation and excellent teamwork shown by the Embassy, POLO and OWWA officers and staff who all pitched in to ensure that the Embassy's job to receive the OFWs from Syria, care for them temporarily in the shelters and ensure their speedy departure out of Lebanon were well

executed without a hitch. Once again, she conveyed the deepest appreciation of the Philippine Government to the Lebanese Government, particularly to the General Security, for the excellent cooperation in facilitating the entry of OFWs from Syria into Lebanon.

She also reiterated the Philippine Government's warmest gratitude and appreciation to the CLMC officials, Eng. Kamal Sioufi and Ms. Najla Chahda, for generously making available a very comfortable shelter for the weary OFWs, as well as a mobile clinic, and particularly their three Caritas personnel who provided invaluable assistance, most especially at the Masna'a border and the Caritas shelter.

The cross-border operation involving 92 OFWs from Syria on 05 September 2013 was the 30th to take place since 12 December 2012 through the joint effort of the Philippine Embassies in Damascus and Beirut. With the departure of 96 OFWs onboard separate flights on 05 and 06 September 2013, the Philippine Embassy in Lebanon has repatriated a total of 1,678 Filipinos from Syria via the Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut. **END**