

'It's the price of a Big Mac over just several days off'

Gilda M Bernal talks to the very people for whom the wage rise means a lot – or a lot less

Adelina Asuncion, a foreign domestic worker in Lai King, was cleaning the toilet when her lady employer banged on the door and shouted "Lina, you will get \$80 more pay every month so make sure the toilet is very clean, or else no \$80."

Instead of saying thanks, Asuncion shrugged off the news of an additional pay, as well as her employer's threat and muttered to herself "what's \$80 going to buy me except for one McDonald meal every Sunday? Ano yan, extra bayad para malinis ko ang maruming banyo?"

Many foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong share Asuncion's sentiment over the government's recent wage increase of \$80 for the more than 200,000 workers in Hong Kong.

"It's an insult to us," Eni Lestari, spokesperson of the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body, told *Filipino Globe*.

AMCB is a group of domestic workers from the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Lestari said the 2.4 per cent increase now makes the minimum allowable wage \$3,480, still \$190 short of the amount in 2003 levels that they have been demanding.

In 2003, the government slashed the minimum wage of \$3,670 by \$400. It also slapped a \$400 monthly levy on the employers of domestic workers.

"We want a significant increase, we want what was taken from us in 2003," Lestari said.

"Eighty dollars is not commensurate to the amount of work that we do, the hours that we work, and even our contribution to the Hong Kong society."



BY THE NUMBERS

Pre-Sars minimum salary of domestic helpers that migrant groups want restored

\$3,670

While workers feel shortchanged by the wage increase, the Hong Kong Employers of Domestic Helpers Association think otherwise.

"We disagree with the recent wage increase," says Joseph Law, chairman of the association. "It was done preemptively and was not justified."

Law said there was no strong

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ENI LESTARI
AMCB spokesperson

economic indicators that would back up the government's action to raise the salary of domestic workers.

He said domestic workers received an increase of \$50 and \$80 in 2005 and 2006, even if local workers did not receive any.

"We believe that this year's wages should be frozen," Law said, adding the association will submit a proposal to the government to stop the yearly review of minimum wages.

"The annual review is not necessary. Unless there are indicators like a strong GDP growth that translates to a better life for the employers and local workers, then that would justify a review," he said.

Asuncion is not sold on the idea. "Even if the increase is only enough to buy one McDo meal on my day off, it's better than not to have any meal at all," Asuncion says.

Hong Kong salaries remain highest in region

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economic crisis and the other in 2003 when the Hong Kong economy reeled in the aftermath of the Sars epidemic, she said.

Labor leaders and militant Filipino groups have decried what they described as the "piece meal" approach to the wage issue and have called for its return to the pre-Sars level.

The pay rise, they claim, will do little to lift their financial well-being, especially at a time when they are feeling the pinch of the appreciating peso.

But Salud is taking a more pragmatic approach to the issue.

"It's a damn-if-you-do, damn-if-you-don't situation for me," he said. "Sabihin mo na masaya ako, sasabihin bakit hindi ipinaglaban ng mas mataas," he said.

"Kapag sinabi ko naman na hindi ako masaya, sasabihin ng iba na binigyan na nga kayo hindi pa kayo

masaya. "But this is the way I look at it: Binigyan ka, pasalamat ka. After all, they need not do that.

"What I'm saying is, if they have given an increase, siguro sensitive rin sila sa needs ng mga manggagawa at meron silang ginagawa for the welfare of the workers.

"On that aspect alone, medyo okay na sa akin."

The government spokesman said the minimum wage is regularly reviewed in light of Hong Kong's economic and employment situation as reflected through a basket of economic indicators, including income movement, price change and labor market situation.

She added the review is done annually with the next review set to commence early next year.

Salud was told that consultations are also done with sectors of society during the review process.

No Philippine representative is part of the consultation, although Salud



Labbat Romy Salud: I give them the benefit of the doubt.

was quick to point out that the decision on who to invite – like anywhere else in the world – is the prerogative of the host government.

Salud also said he is not doubting the sincerity of the process.

"In capsule, they told us that they gathered a lot of data, matrix and indicators and according to that study,

itong amount na ito ang dapat ibigay," said Salud.

"I give them the benefit of the doubt.

"I'm sure pinag-aralan yan. Ang Hong Kong kasi hindi naman ito ang tipo ng bansa na diktador na sasabihin ganito lang ang gusto ko or sasabihin, 'wala.' Iba naman ang kinalalagyan nating sitwasyon dito."

Despite the fluctuations in the minimum wage, Hong Kong salaries remain the highest among all major destinations for Filipin domestic helpers in Asia and the Middle East.

Labor officials also announced that contracts signed on or before June 5 at a wage level on or above the previous minimum wage of \$3,400 per month will still be processed, provided the applications reach the Immigration Department on or before July 3.

This is to allow employers enough time to complete the processing of the papers before submitting them to the department, it said.

ANGBANSA

Dumaguete

The city council has appropriated an additional P5 million to fund a special program for health services in Dumaguete.

Mayor Agustin Perdices requested for the amount in stressing the importance of public health, which he said is often overlooked as a factor in development and progress.

Perdices said the past year's budgetary allocation for health services was only P3.5 million, compared with public education which was P12 million.

He asked for the additional appropriation in support of the government's national health insurance program.

Meanwhile, starting on August 15, the traffic management office will enforce traffic rules and regulations inside Silliman University particularly along Hibbard Avenue.

Pampanga

Acting governor Joseller Guiao has denied a request from governor-elect Eddie Panlilio to postpone the bidding of infrastructure projects.

Guiao said in a letter to Panlilio, there was no valid reason that the bidding should be postponed, considering the project for bidding has been posted at the provincial bulletin and in Phil-G-EPS website.



Earlier, Panlilio in a letter, asked Guiao to defer the scheduled bidding saying that, "yours is no more than a caretaker administration".

Panlilio also warned Guiao, saying that, "you are duty bound to prepare for the orderly transfer of authority of the incoming governor and should not do acts which you ought to know, would embarrass or obstruct the policies of his successor."

Davao

The Southern Philippines Development Authority has entered into an agreement with the Housing and Urban Development Coordinating Council to fast-track the sale of its three properties occupied by informal settlers.

SPDA Administrator Zamzamin Ampatuan said the HUDCC agreed to pay for the properties on behalf of the squatters and facilitate the Community Mortgage Program for the communities.

Ampatuan said his agency is hoping the sale of the property in Sasa will be processed, followed the properties in Catitipan, Malagamot and Panacan.

He said the three properties covered by the agreement have an aggregate value of about P200 million.