

Manila's Old City Hosts New Migration Library and Centre for Returning Migrants

By Ricardo R. Casco, IOM Manila

On a beautiful, sunny day in March, two long-neglected nooks in Manila's old, Spanish-walled Intramuros quarter became home to a critical new resource for tens of thousands of Filipino migrants.

A throng of spectators attended the unveiling of the Migration Information Resource Center (MIRC) and the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRC) by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and IOM Director General Brunson McKinley.

Filipino Department Labor and Employment (DOLE) Secretary Arturo Brion, the man behind the idea, addressed

the crowd, explaining the Philippines' migration governance model and the development role of reintegration and migration information systems.

After cutting the ribbon, President Arroyo experimented with the user-friendly touch screens at an information kiosk at the NRC, posing as a returning nurse. "If I were a nurse returning to my country, what can this computer do for me?" she asked.

The NRC is envisioned as a one-stop centre for reintegration counselling, training, information and venture project facilitation to create socio-economic reintegration that benefits the individual, the family, the community and the country as a whole.

The MIRC, will function as a resource centre for potential and returning migrants, and will host a central migration library.

Secretary Brion expects the two bodies to develop into a forum for coordination between government, industry and civil society, supported by a wide range of public and private sector bodies.

In its initial stage, the NRC will be a first port of call for Filipino Labour Attachés and Welfare Officers returning home from overseas posts. As reintegration counselors, they will be able to share their wealth of experience with Filipino migrant workers.

▼ Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo cutting the ribbon with DOLE Secretary Arturo Brion and IOM Director General Brunson McKinley with IOM Manila Regional Representative Bruce Reed looking on (Photo: © IOM, 2007)





▲ DOLE building facade where MIRC is located (Photo: © IOM, 2007)

The government's reintegration goals include the productive and development-oriented use of migrants' foreign earnings and the skills that they learnt abroad. A National Reintegration Summit to discuss these issues is planned for later this year.

Filipino migration has been a hot topic for decades among politicians, the media, academia and experts, not just in the Philippines, but worldwide. But the mass of data has always been difficult to track down from widely dispersed libraries and internet sources.

In April, a month after the inauguration of the MIRC and following an agreement signed with the DOLE, IOM sent experts from Geneva, Bangkok and Manila to



▲ Director General Brunson McKinley and DOLE Secretary Arturo Brion unveiling the NRC marker (Photo: © IOM, 2007)

the centre to conduct a basic orientation course on Library, Web, Publication and Communication Management on Migration.

This seminar was attended by librarians, website managers, publication and communication specialists of six government agencies under the DOLE.

"Sensitization is the first step needed to pursue an ambitious project to build a central migration library in the country. Training is scarce and librarians are part of the brain drain," says the publication chief of the Institute of Labor Studies, Katherine Brimon.

Workshop participants conceded that the creation of a migration library is in many ways an experimental venture that will force stakeholders to think outside their customary boxes in order to create a shared framework.

"I don't want them to turf (war); the Philippines has led in migration management and must show a lead in establishing a central (migration) library system," says Secretary Brion.

The workshop proposed the development of a central library, including the establishment of electronic linkages for websites, joint cataloguing systems and customer-driven satellite facilities.

IOM librarians attending the workshop noted that libraries in the Philippines have struggled with limited resources, a shortage of expertise and ever changing terms of reference. Traditional libraries continue to house much of the relevant migration material, much of it gleaned from countless conferences and workshops.

But there is a growing awareness of the need to start converting material to digital format, particularly photographs and images. "It is our 25th year anniversary and we are hunting for images to tell our institutional history," says Salome Mendoza, Planning Director of the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency (POEA).

The MIRC and the NRC will also be free to draw on the experience of IOM Migrant Resource Centres established in several countries, which also use libraries and websites to promote knowledge of migration.

Conversely, a European Commission-funded IOM project on Regional Dialogue and Facilitating Legal and Managed Migration from Asia to Europe is also interested in using the MIRC as a means to disseminate information modules and materials on irregular migration in the European Union.

Synergies between the objectives of the new DOLE centres and IOM's global migration management objectives offer a variety of avenues for constructive collaboration. And that is good news for the tens of thousands of Filipino migrants expected to benefit from the centres in the coming months and years. **M**



▼ President Arroyo tries the information kiosk at NRC (Photo: © IOM, 2007)