

Elvira Rodriguez**From:** Washdcpepress@aol.com [Washdcpepress@aol.com]**Sent:** Mon 12/15/2003 8:59 AM**To:** Washdcpepress@aol.com**Cc:****Subject:** PHILIPPINE EMBASSY NEWS RELEASE 14 DECEMBER 2003**Attachments:**

**PHILIPPINE EMBASSY
NEWS RELEASE
14 DECEMBER 2003**

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PRESS RELEASE NO. 1: Statement Of Ambassador Albert Del Rosario on the demise of Sec. Blas F. Ople

On behalf of the Philippine Embassy, I wish to convey our profound condolences to the family of Secretary Blas F. Ople on his demise.

The entire Filipino nation is in deep mourning with the passing of one of the greatest Filipinos who had essayed a vital role in Philippine contemporary history.

For a decade, from 1992 to 2002, Secretary Ople served as chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. In this capacity, he steered the ratification of no less than 110 international and bilateral treaties. These accords broadened the country's links with the rest of the world in the fields of trade, investments, employment, cultural exchanges, workers protection and the environment.

Elected as Senate President in 1999, he successfully sponsored a resolution on the ratification of the RP-US Visiting Forces Agreement. After a hiatus with the withdrawal of US forces from the Philippines in 1991, this initial stimulus led to the full reinvigoration of our bilateral relations. By espousing a "new partnership with the US based on sovereign equality and mutual respect," he was a key figure behind the metamorphosis of our ties from a paradigm of patronage and dependency into a mature plane anchored on the complementarity of our respective national interests.

In an era of globalization, Secretary Ople - in tandem with then-Senator Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo - was instrumental in the ratification of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Uruguay Round creating the World Trade Organization. He was also the author of one version of the Overseas Voting Bill which was enacted as the Overseas Voting Law. For the first time ever, overseas-based Filipinos have been enfranchised to exercise their right to vote.

With these wealth of experience, he lent gravitas to the Philippine Foreign Service with his appointment as Secretary of Foreign Affairs on 23 July 2002. Endowed with native intelligence and insight, an astute assessment of emerging regional and global trends, a strategic vision, and principled pragmatism, Secretary Ople creatively harnessed the instrument of diplomacy in promoting our country's interests.

That he died in the course of official duty, underscored his unwavering commitment to serve his country and his people to the best of his ability, even in his twilight years.

Let us honor his name and his patriotic cause by turning our grief into firmer resolve to be of greater service to our nation. Let us imbue ourselves with the core values which had guided him in his entire public career: love of country, dedication to duty and professional integrity. His death is an irreplaceable loss, but his inspiring legacy will always live on. (END)

PRESS RELEASE NO. 2: Statement of Ambassador Albert Del Rosario on the capture of Saddam Hussein

ON BEHALF OF THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT, I WISH TO CONGRATULATE PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE US MILITARY FORCES FOR THE CAPTURE OF THE OUSTED IRAQI DICTATOR SADDAM HUSSEIN.

SADDAM WILL BE BROUGHT TO JUSTICE AND WILL BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR HIS CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

THIS DEVELOPMENT, WHICH WAS MET BY JUBILATION BY THE IRAQI PEOPLE THEMSELVES, IS A MAJOR VICTORY FOR THE CAUSE OF FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE WORLD.

AS A MEMBER OF THE COALITION BEHIND "OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM", THE PHILIPPINE GOVERNMENT IS HOPEFUL THAT THE CAPTURE OF SADDAM WILL CONTRIBUTE TO THE FULL RESTORATION OF ORDER AND STABILITY IN IRAQ.

UNDER THIS ENVIRONMENT, THE RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS IN IRAQ WILL BE ABLE TO PROCEED AT A BETTER PACE. A PHILIPPINE CONTINGENT IS PRESENTLY IN IRAQ ASSISTING IN THIS ENDEAVOR

WE ARE CONFIDENT THAT A STRONG IRAQ WILL ONCE AGAIN RISE - THIS TIME AS A BASTION OF DEMOCRACY WHERE THE IRAQI PEOPLE CAN LIVE IN DIGNITY AND WITH A SENSE OF OPTIMISM ABOUT THEIR FUTURE.

(END)

PRESS RELEASE NO. 3: The Good News: SBMA labor force up by 8.5 percent in first half of 2003

The Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) continues to live up on its mandate to create employment opportunities for Central Luzon residents with thousands of job openings during the first six months of the year.

In its mid-year report, the SBMA said that the Subic Freeport is on the edge of doubling the 30,000 jobs lost after the US base pull-out as comparative statistic show. This premier freeport zone now has a total of 58,017 workers.

SBMA Chairman Felicito C. Payumo said that for the first half of the year alone, Subic Freeport locators have exceeded last year's employment figure of 48,874 with additional job openings of 4,143 or about 8.5 percent higher than the total 53,017 employees as of June this year.

This figure is on top of the combined 5,000 employees of the SBMA and its subsidiary, the Freeport Services Corporation (FSC) for over-all total Freeport workforce of 58,017.

Statistics released by the SBMA showed that service-oriented companies in the freeport zone, particularly those engaged in various tourism-related businesses such as hotels/restaurants duty-free stores, trading and

transportation, have posted the biggest number of employees with a total of 22,726 workers.

The manufacturing sector, despite the reported sudden slow down in its export earnings for the first six months particularly on electronic products, was able to maintain a high employment figure of 18,034 production workers. Payumo, however, expressed optimism that export performance of the freeport would do a rebound in the second half of this year.

Apart from these, the rising number of workers in the construction business has also been noted due to several on-going development and other infrastructure projects being implemented by private developers such as the Grande Island, Moon Bay Marina, Subic Techno Park Phase 2 project, the Greenwoods Park and the Subic Forest Adventure.

"The SBMA is confident that the number of workers compared during the US Navy days will be doubled before the year ends with the entry of new companies and expansion projects of existing locators," Payumo said.

Olongapo City remains the biggest source of workers with 27,722 or about 52 percent as Zambales shares 14.8 percent with 7,849 workers while Bataan and Pampanga contributes 6,596 (14 percent) and 1,090 (2 percent), respectively.

Payumo, a former congressman who co-authored Republic Act 7227 otherwise known as the Bases Conversion Law of 1992, said that more jobs will be available this year for residents in surrounding communities with the approval of 71 new business projects with committed employment of over 2,000.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 4: GMA off to Hong Kong and Bahrain

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo left this morning for a five-hour visit to Hong Kong to express her appreciation and extend Christmas greetings to the Filipino community there before proceeding to Bahrain for a two-day state visit.

The President took off from Villamor Airbase at 7:30 a.m. on a chartered plane and was expected arrive at 9:30 a.m. at the Business Aviation Center, CLK Airport in Hong Kong.

She is scheduled to leave for Bahrain at 12:05 after her activities in Hong Kong. She is expected to arrive there 4:35 pm.

Vice-President Teofisto Guingona, Executive Secretary Alberto Romulo, Armed Forces Chief-of-Staff General Narciso Abaya, PNP Chief General Hermogenes Ebdane and other top military and police officials saw off the President.

The President was accompanied by a small delegation led by Presidential Spokesperson Ignacio Bunye and Presidential Adviser the Peace Process Teresita Quintos-Deles.

Upon arrival in Hong Kong, she goes to the Main Exhibition Hall of the Hong Kong International Trade and Exhibit Center in Kowloon for a meeting with the Filipino community where she will distribute Pag-IBIG bonds to some OFWs and grant an OWWA (Overseas Workers Welfare Administration) scholarship to a child of an OFW.

In Bahrain where she will pursue diplomatic and economic thrusts, the President will be welcomed by King Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Salman Al-Khalifa, Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman-Khalifa and Prince Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa at the Bahrain International Airport. From there she immediately proceeds to Shaikh Hamad Palace.

She will have a bilateral meeting with Bahrain's King Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa at the Majilis Room, Shaikh Ahmad Palace and to be followed by a state dinner.

On the second day (December 15), the President will cut the ribbon to open a Philippine information technology school, the AMA International University.

It will be followed by a meeting with the officers and members of the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry and a separate meeting with the officers of the Bahrain Banker's Society.

She will have a private lunch with the Bahrain's Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa.

She will meet the Filipino community at the Diplomat Hotel before she departs for Manila on December 16 (Tuesday) as she did Friday when she was in Tokyo for the ASEAN-Japan Commemorative Summit.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 5: President's Radio Address to the Nation

Magandang araw sa inyong lahat. Kadarating ko lamang mula sa dalawang araw na mabungang pagbisita sa bansang Hapon. Ang una sa tatlong bansang nakatakda kong puntahan kaugnay ng aking paglakbay para sa pangkapayapaan at kaunlaran. Bukas pupunta naman ako sa Hongkong at kasunod nito sa Bahrain. I met the Filipino community in Japan and greeted them a Merry Christmas in behalf of all our people.

Sa Japan ay dumalo ako sa ASEAN Japan Summit kung saan ang mga lider ng ASEAN na tulad ko ay muling nagpahayag ng pagkakaisa tungo sa mas matatag na samahang pangkaunlaran at seguridad. Partikular nating itinaguyod ang pagpapalakas ng Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines East Asian Growth Area o the EAGA. Hindi lamang sa larangan ng ekonomiya, kundi sa pangrehiyong seguridad lalo na laban sa terrorismo at transnational crimes. Nakipagpulong ako kay Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Nagpasalamat ako sa pinakamalaking pinagkakaloob na official development assistance ng Japan at karamihan nito ay mapupunta sa Mindanao, mainly sa Muslim areas. We also want to be Japan's global human resource partner so that we can deploy Filipino workers to take care of Japan's aging population and to handle the IT operations.

Nakipagpulong din ako sa bagong lider ng Malaysia, si Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi. Ang Malaysia ang facilitator o pangunahing tagapagtuguyod sa isasagawang peace talks o sa pangkapayapaang sa pagitan ng ating pamahalaan at ang Moro Islamic Liberation Front or MILF.

Ang aking paglalakbay na ito ay magtatapos sa Bahrain na nagpahiwatig ng interest sa ating patuloy na paghanap ng kalutasan sa mga problema sa Mindanao. Katunayan, patuloy nitong sinusuportahan ang ating pagsisikap na mabigyan ng observer's status sa OIC o Organization of Islamic Conference. Isa rin ang Bahrain sa mga nagtulak para makakuha tayo ng non-permanent seat sa United Nations Security Council. Ang Bahrain din ay isa sa mga observers sa ceasefire sa pagitan ng pamahalaan at ng MILF. Tatalakayin din namin ng King of Bahrain, ang iba pang mahalagang bagay tulad ng pagpapalago ng kalakaran, pamumuhunan at turismo.

Isa rin sa mga pangunahing dahilan ng pagbiyahe kong ito ay upang makaniig ang ating mga magigiting na OFW na alam ko na labis na nalulungkot sa panahong ito ng kapaskuhan. Ginawa ko ito sa Japan at gagawin ko rin sa Hongkong at Bahrain. Alam naman nating lahat na ang patuloy na lumalaking remittances ng ating OFWs ang isa sa mga pangunahing dahilan kung bakit nagpapakita ng kasiglahan ang ating ekonomiya. Magmula ng ako ay maging pangulo umabot na sa 17 billion dollars mahigit ang OFW remittances mula January 2001 hanggang June 2003.

Mahigit din sa dalawang milyong OFWs ang nagpunta sa hundred sixty-five overseas destinations mula July 2001 hanggang October 2003. Kaya nga ang pagbiyahe kong ito ay isa ring paraan para muli nating mapasalamat ang ating mga OFW sa ginagawa nilang pagmamalasakit at pagsasakripisyo para sa atin at ang panahon ng kapaskuhan ang pinakamagandang sandali para gawin ang pasasalamat na ito.

At para naman sa kasiyahan at kapanatagan ng ating OFW personal kong ipinapaabot sa kanila sa biyaheng ito ang ilan sa mga nakasisiyang kaganapan dito sa ating bansa. Ang patuloy na pasigla ng ating ekonomiya na number six sa bente unong ekonomiya ng Asia-Pacific sa pag-angat. Ang pagtaas pamumuhunan 22%. Ang tumaas na registered investment sa BOI at mga economic zone.

Ang matagumpay na kampanya laban sa illegal na droga at ibang kriminalidad. Ang pagkakahuli sa mga pangunahing lider at kasapi ng mga sindikatong sangkot sa kidnap, carnapping, terrorismo at ang tagumpay ng mga programa ng gobyerno tulad ng agriculture modernization kung saan pinakamalawak na irrigasyon at doble ng ani ng high breed rice ang naganap. Pabahay pinakamalawak din na programa sa kasaysayan ng ating bansa. Health care kung saan higit kalahati na ng ating mga mamamayan ay sakop na ng health insurance, turismo at iba pa.

Gusto ko din bigyang liwanag ang ilang bagay na kanilang nababalitaan na maaring nakakagulo sa kanilang isipan. Ang kapakanan at karapatan ng ating mga OFW at ang kanilang mga pamilya ay prioridad sa aking administrasyon na kailan lamang ay naisabatas natin ang Overseas Absentee Voting Act kasunod nito ang Dual Citizenship Act.

Meron din provident fund ang gobyerno para magkaloob ng social services at emergency loans para ang ating mga OFW. Meron ng halos twenty five thousand enrollees sa provident fund na nasa Hongkong, Jeddah, Khatar, Milan at Rome. Tumatanggap na rin ng bagong account ang fund sa mga SSS offices at accredited banks sa Brunei, Saipan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Kow Zsu, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi at Kuwait.

At hindi lamang yon, yung Anti-Money Laundering Law ay nakatulong din para hindi mahirapan ang ating mga OFWs sa red tape pag padala nila ng kanilang remittances sa ating bansa.

Mga kababayan, lahat ng pwedeng gawin ay ginagawa maisulong lamang ang kaunlaran at kapayapaan. Pero ang lahat ng ito ay patuloy lamang natin mapagtatagumpayan kung nariyan kayo at patuloy na sumusuporta sa akin. Sa mahigit na dalawang taon at kalahati sa aking panunungkulan bilang pangulo naging malinaw sa akin ang mga nararapat gawin para matamo natin nang tuluyan ang tunay na kapayapaan at kaunlaran. Huwag kayong bitaw dahil kaya natin ito.

Maraming salamat.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 6: Statement of the President on Secretary Ople's passing

The nation mourns the death of a great Filipino. We were awed by the vision and indomitable wit of Secretary Blas F. Ople. He was an architect of Philippine foreign policy in the finest tradition of enlightened and pragmatic diplomacy, a champion of peace, human rights, collective security and the rule of law. We will miss him and the world will miss him.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 7: Statement of the Family of Secretary Blas F. Ople

We are deeply saddened and regret to announce that Secretary Blas F. Ople passed away today of natural causes.

The Secretary was on a flight to the Kingdom of Bahrain for the State Visit of H.E. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo coming from the recently concluded ASEAN-Japan Summit in Tokyo, Japan, when the Secretary experienced difficulty of breathing, and subsequently lost consciousness. The Captain of the flight declared a medical emergency and diverted to Taiwan.

Efforts by medical personnel to revive him, on the flight and in hospital proved unsuccessful.

The Secretary died in the service for his country.

Our family members, led by Mrs. Susana V. Ople, are in Taiwan to arrange the return of the remains of the Secretary to the Philippines.

We would like to express our profound appreciation to the crew of the flight of the Secretary, the officials of Taiwan, the airport and airline officials in Taiwan, the medical staff of the Min Sheng General Hospital in Taiwan and most especially the officers and staff of the Manila Economic and Cultural Office (MECO) led by Chairman Antonio Basilio in Manila and MECO Representative Espinosa in Taipah, for their efforts on behalf of the Secretary.

We would also like to express our deep appreciation for the prayers and kind thoughts for the Secretary and our family at this most difficult time.

Details on further arrangements will be announced shortly.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 8: Statement of the Department of Foreign Affairs

The officers and personnel of the Department of Foreign Affairs wish to convey their sincerest condolences to the family of the late Secretary Blas F. Ople, who passed away today, 14 December 2003, of natural causes in Taiwan.

Secretary Ople was a patriot and a true statesman who was appointed by the President to the position of Secretary of Foreign Affairs in July 2002, after a successful stint in the Philippine Senate, where he served as President Pro-Tempore, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and later as Senate President in the middle part of 1999.

As Secretary of Foreign Affairs, he initiated the continuing effort to establish a world-class Philippine Foreign Service as an integral part of the nation's strong Republic. His term as Foreign Affairs Secretary was marked by the successful five-year campaign of the Philippines for membership in the UN Security Council, the election of the country to the International Maritime Organization (IMO) based in London and several successful candidatures in the UNESCO.

Secretary Ople was also instrumental in the recent election of the Philippines to the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and the Members of their Families. In addition, he pursued the country's re-election bid in the FAO Council in Rome for the term 2004-2007 to underscore the successes achieved by the government in food security and poverty alleviation through increased agricultural productivity.

In achieving these goals, the Department under the leadership of Secretary Ople simultaneously carried out its initiatives to improve its services to overseas Filipinos, enhance economic and cultural diplomacy, support the international community in the fight against terrorism and promote regional peace and security, as well as lay the groundwork for the implementation of the Overseas Absentee Voting Law.

Secretary Ople left behind a legacy of professionalism, service and dedication worthy of emulation by the officers and personnel of the Department of Foreign Affairs. His death is a great loss to the Philippine Government and to the Filipino nation.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 9: Nation mourns death of Ople

"The nation mourns the death of a great Filipino."

Thus were the words of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on the death of Foreign Affairs Secretary Blas Ople in Taiwan this morning.

"We were awed by the vision and indomitable wit of Secretary Blas F. Ople," the President said in a statement released by Malacanang.

President Macapagal-Arroyo described him as "an architect of Philippine foreign policy in the finest tradition of enlightened and pragmatic diplomacy, a champion of peace, human rights, collective security and the rule of law."

"We will miss him and the world will miss him," she added.

Acting Foreign Affairs Secretary Franklin Ebdalin said Ople was "very intelligent."

"I would even classify him as genius," Ebdalin said. "I do not hear him saying bad things against anyone. He was very kind to people."

Born on Feb. 3, 1927 to working class parents in the fishing town of Hagonoy in Bulacan, Ople was a man of numerous talents and a long chain of achievements.

He was a statesman, constitutionalist, legislator, civil servant, book author, publicist, university lecturer, journalist and freedom fighter.

The President appointed then Sen. Ople as foreign affairs secretary on July 23, 2002.

Ople was first elected senator for a six-year term in 1992, and was reelected in May 1998 for a second term. He was chairman of the Senate Committees on Foreign Affairs, on Civil Service and Reorganization and on Education, Culture and the Arts.

He was also elected Senate President Pro Tempore in 1998, and President of the Senate in mid-1999.

Ople successfully steered the Senate passage of some 110 international and bilateral treaties that gave the Philippines wider access to international trade, investments, employment, cultural exchanges, worker protection and environment preservation.

He also sponsored, together with then Sen. Macapagal-Arroyo, the ratification of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Uruguay Round creating the World Trade

He authored one version of the Overseas Voting Bill which has since been enacted into law.

Then President Ferdinand E. Marcos appointed Ople as Secretary of Labor in 1967-later renamed Minister of Labor during the martial law regime. He held the post until early 1986 following the downfall of the Marcos in the historic EDSA Revolt of 1986. The following year, he was named a member of the 1987 Constitutional Commission.

As labor secretary, Ople was chief architect of the Labor Code of the Philippines which Marcos signed into law as Presidential Decree 442.

He also launched a national manpower development program through the National Manpower and Youth Council which has since been renamed Technical Education and Skills Development Authority.

As a statesman, Ople lectured at seven high-level symposiums on politics, economics and finance sponsored by the Financial Times of London in different world capitals.

In 1975, he was elected president of the 60th International Labor Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, becoming the first Filipino to hold that post. From 1983 to 1986, he was recognized doyen and spokesman of the world's labor ministers.

He was elected assemblyman for Central Luzon, topping the winning slate of 16 candidates. He was voted Member of the Parliament for Bulacan in the regular Batasang Pambansa, and sponsored sectoral representation, the progenitor of the present party list representation in the House of Representatives.

At age 16, during World War II, he became a first lieutenant in the Del Pilar Regiment, Bulacan Military Area.

A product of public schools from elementary to college, Ople considered himself as largely self-taught. Nonetheless, he received numerous honorary degrees, both locally and internationally.

In recognition of his sterling achievements, he was conferred the Order of Sikatuna Award, rank of Datu, by President Macapagal-Arroyo on Aug. 13, 2003.

Ople was married to the former Susana Vasquez and has seven children, all of them successful professionals.

The family statement said Ople was on a flight to Bahrain for the President's state visit when he suffered difficulty in breathing, and lost consciousness. The plane's captain declared a medical emergency and diverted to Taiwan, but efforts to revive him proved futile.

The family immediately flew to Taiwan to arrange the return of Ople's remains to Manila.

"We would like to express our profound appreciation to the crew of the flight of the Secretary, the officials of Taiwan, the airport and airline officials in Taiwan, the medical staff of the Min-Sheng General Hospital in Taiwan and most especially the officers and staff of the Manila Economic and Cultural Office led by Chairman Antonio Basilio in Manila and MECO representative Espinosa in Taipei for their efforts on behalf of the Secretary," the family said.

PRESS RELEASE NO. 10: GMA underscores need for reforms in gov't

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo underscored today the need to institute reforms in government policies and programs with the view of uplifting the people's quality of life.

Addressing overseas Filipino workers at the Hong Kong International Trade and Exhibit Center in Kowloon, the President said her series of overseas travels is part of the changes needed in the pursuit of her economic and political objectives.

"Ours is an administration that has been working across continents to bring the message of the Filipino pride and pride in the Filipino's bright future," the President said.

"In my two years and a half in the presidency, I have seen what changes are needed in my system (of governance). One of these is the establishment of a Philippine version of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC)," Mrs. Macapagal-Arroyo added.

She revealed that part of her preparations to attain the desired reforms is her decision to engage the expertise of the architect of the first ICAC as her adviser.

President Macapagal-Arroyo had a whistle stop in Hong Kong on her way for a state visit in Bahrain.

"After my meeting with you today, I shall leave for Bahrain. And in Bahrain, the meetings will also pursue the same thrust as what I sought in Japan. We shall widen the range of our diplomacy to reinforce our domestic policies and programs to uplift the lives of our people," the President told the OFWs.

During her two-day visit in Japan last week, the President said she worked for a "better deal for our OFWs and made more gains for peace and development in Mindanao."

She also said Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi has agreed to open formal negotiations next month for the entry of OFWs such as caregivers, midwives and nurses and information technology professionals into Japan.

"This is part of the reforms and changes in the system, and part of the unity and reconciliation we are seeking in our country as we bring all Filipinos worldwide, or at home together behind the same march for peace, progress and prosperity," the President said.