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Perfect drug mules

How have we become the world's favorite transshipment point for opium, cocaine, and heroin? How have Filipinos become the favorite couriers for such high-value drugs? The reports say that as many as 630 Filipinos are being held today for drug trafficking in various jails all over the world. Of these, 205 are detained in Chinese prisons alone. These are alarming figures by any measure. Who are these Filipinos? How did they get into this criminal trade?

A cursory look at the profile of the three Filipinos currently awaiting execution in China for drug trafficking, and another one detained in a Thai prison, suggests that all of them left the country as part of the exodus of Filipinos seeking work abroad. Whether they knew it or not, they all appear to have been recruited by international drug syndicates run by West Africans.

Ramon Credo, 42, was caught smuggling more than four kilos of heroin into Xiamen in December 2008. Four days earlier, Sally Villanueva, 32, was intercepted in the same city while smuggling more or less the same amount of heroin. Elizabeth Batain was arrested in Shenzhen in May 2008 for possession of almost seven kilograms of heroin. On the other hand, Flory May Talaban, who worked as a tutor for an African couple in China, has been in a Thai prison since her arrest in 2009 for carrying almost three kilograms of heroin inside one of her books. These three Filipino women are not typical drug couriers. They have valid identities as working migrant women. That is what makes them relatively "invisible."

The world's biggest producer of opium is Afghanistan, followed by

Burma. At once, this suggests a path for drug smuggling. From the poppy fields of Afghanistan, the opiates find their way into Pakistan, and from there to the rest of the world. Or, from the opium farms of Burma, they wind up in Bangkok after being smuggled through the porous borders of Northern Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos. The Philippines is neither a producer nor a destination for heroin – but it is a strategic transshipment hub. It appears that the drugs could be quickly offloaded at any point of the country's long unpatrolled coastline. They are then repacked and shipped out through our airports with the help of Filipino drug mules, who are increasingly made to use their own bodies as containers.

In the past, Europe and North America were the destinations of this lucrative trade. Today, given the shift in economic fortunes, China - - with its new generation of millionaires and rising young middle class – has become the principal market for these illicit and expensive drugs. Once again, our proximity to the giant next door is shaping our circumstances as a people.

My colleague, the late University of the Philippines Professor Ricardo Zarco, who studied patterns of drug use in the Philippines for many years, used to express surprise whenever the police announced a drug bust yielding large amounts of cocaine or heroin. He was certain these were not meant for local consumption. The country's sluggish economy could not support a steady market for such drugs, he said. These seized drugs could only be meant for re-export. In those days, long before the American financial collapse, the destination was the United States. The US market however radically shrunk following aggressive trans-border crackdowns conducted by American authorities.

Like multinational companies, global drug syndicates ride the tide of changing economic conditions. Yesterday it was the American market, today it is the China market. While China has nurtured an enduring historical antagonism towards narcotics, the opening of its economic

borders, which is responsible for its present dynamism, has brought with it all the problems associated with globalization. People from all over the world are pouring into China to help build and to partake of its newfound prosperity. Among them are our own people.

In the last 35 years, Filipinos have joined the ranks of the world's most mobile and ubiquitous world travelers. The Filipino passport has become the most recognizable symbol of the economic refugee. This document signals to every immigration officer the presence of an intrepid human being who will accept any kind of work for the most miserable pay. In the early years of Filipino overseas labor deployment, the face of the OFW was the male construction worker in the Middle East. With the feminization of migration, it became, not long after, that of the domestic helper and caregiver. Soon it became that of the nurse, the teacher, the office worker, or the young Pinoy information technology professional.

These shifts in the pattern of global travel and migration must surely have been noted by international drug syndicates. In the Filipino overseas workers they have found the perfect mules. Their financial need is great and often desperate. Once they accept the job, they take risks whose dimensions they are not fully aware of. Articulate in English, but projecting the aura of novice travelers, they can talk their way out of difficult situations. Migrants like them are familiar faces at every port, and thus they remain pretty much below the radar screen.

So compartmentalized and layered are their dealings with the drug syndicates that when they are caught, no one comes to their rescue. Their arrest does not lead the authorities to the core of the syndicate they serve.

Indeed, they are victims of a system. But, which system? The drug rings that exploit their vulnerability, or the society that pushes them out of their own country to seek work in unfamiliar lands?

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