

Number of overseas voters up: DFA

MANILA -- The number of registered Filipino voters overseas for the upcoming polls has increased by more than 100 percent than the figure six years ago.

Data obtained by the Philippine News Agency (PNA) from the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) showed that 1,822,115 million overseas Filipinos have been registered for the May 13 elections. Of this number, 794,286 are newly-registered.

The figure marks an increase of more than 100 percent compared to the 737,759 registered voters in the 2013 mid-term elections, and at least 32.4 percent more compared to the 1,376,067 registered voters in 2016 when President Rodrigo R. Duterte won.

Courtesy of DFA-Overseas Voting Secretariat

In the 2013 elections, the overseas voter turnout was pegged at 16.11 percent or a total of 118,823. The highest voter turnout came from the Asia Pacific (ASPAC) with 51,361 in 2013, and Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with 162,261 in 2016.

The DFA-Overseas Voting Secretariat estimated a 30 percent to 50 percent -- or about 548,764 to 914,607 -- voter turnout in May.

The biggest number of active registered voters are in the Middle East and Africa region with 887,744; followed by ASPAC with 401,390; the North and Latin American region with 345,415; and Europe with 187,624.

While the "decisive votes" are in the hands of those in the country, garnering support from overseas voters is equally important as Filipinos abroad could also influence their families back home, political analyst Ramon Casiple told PNA in an

interview on Wednesday.

"If we're talking about their direct votes, it's not too significant because we are talking about a million. It's good if the votes are solid (to one party) but we don't have a record yet of solid voting," Casiple said.

"But there is a second weather of influence -- it's their families. If they can organize themselves and campaign for their candidates among their families, and their families to the community - it would have a big impact," he added.

But what could woo Filipinos overseas in voting candidates for the Congress? By voting abroad, Filipinos can encourage legislators to look into issues that affect them, including overseas workers' rights.

For Eduardo Lapira, an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) in Las Vegas, Nevada, the US, Congress bets should align their envisioned laws to further protect Filipinos abroad.

"There should be proposals to strengthen punishment against illegal recruiters and sanction against agencies that refuse to protect the abused OFWs," he said.

Other proposals are for the conduct an annual survey in Embassies and Consulates General to monitor and rate elected officials, which for him, would show sincerity should they win the elections.

Jenne Martinez, a mother of two and an OFW in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, on the other hand, said on top of her list are candidates whose platform is focused on assisting their families home.

"As a mother working overseas, I would like to have a representative whose campaign platform promises to reach out to the children of

OFWs, especially for those out-of-school children," she said.

"This initiative may be simple, but I'm certain this would be a great help for Filipino parents working in another country," she added.

Liberty Marcial and Gang Lomonggo, OFWs from Kuwait and Hong Kong respectively, shared similar points with Martinez -- continuation and development of more programs for Filipinos abroad.

Registered Filipino voters may cast their votes starting April 13 until May 13.

At the Philippine Embassy in Tokyo alone, Consul General Robespierre Bolivar noted a surge in new voters registration or about 130 percent more than the Philippine government forecast. For the 2019 mid-

term elections, around 35,000 were added to the previous 39,369 registered Filipino voters in Japan.

Of the total active Filipino voters abroad, at least 75,000 are based in Japan, he said.

Last week, the Commission on Elections began training personnel of the Philippine Embassy in Japan, as well as other Philippine foreign posts on the technical aspects of the automated postal voting system.

The Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV) Act or Republic Act 9189 was passed in 2003, allowing Filipinos abroad to take part in the elections.

Under the OAV, Filipinos working or residing overseas who are qualified to vote may elect 12 senators and a party-list representative. (PNA)

He said the Executive Order 70 issued by President Rodrigo R. Duterte on Dec. 4, 2018 to institutionalize a whole-of-nation approach in attaining peace, will be beneficial in local peace engagements.

"Ang kagandahan nito (The good thing about this) is during the negotiation kasama lahat yung (all) Cabinet members (are part of it)," he said.

Galvez, meanwhile, clarified that the peace talks are not terminated, saying members of the government negotiating panel will be reconstituted after the Joint National Peace and Order Council agreed to pursue localized peace engagements instead.

On Wednesday, Malacañang confirmed the termination of the appointments of government peace negotiators with communist rebels "in view of the termination of the peace negotiations" with the CPP-NPA-NDF.

Mindanao in Category Red means gov't should be ready: Comelec

MANILA -- A Commission on Elections (Comelec) official said Thursday the purpose of placing the entire Mindanao Island under Category Red is for the national government to be ready for any untoward incident that may arise before the May 13 mid-term polls.

"By placing all of Mindanao under Category Red, the Comelec simply seeks to ensure utmost responsiveness to whatever need may arise," Comelec spokesperson, James Jimenez, said in a statement.

Jimenez, however, noted that though other places in the region are relatively peaceful, the Comelec is not sure if these areas would not be affected by any elec-

tion-related conflict that could erupt.

"The inescapable reality is that election-related violent incidents respect no municipal borders; and that the activities of armed groups and terror organizations are not always clearly demarcated," he said.

Jimenez, nonetheless, assured the people that the Comelec will remain impartial, shrugging off concerns that such announcement might lead to partisanship.

"With regard to the apprehension that this declaration might lead to partisanship by the Comelec, the election management body reassures the public that this will not happen," he said.

"The results reporting procedures of the automated election system are fully transparent and protected by multiple redundancies which, by and large, have been proven successful in preventing cheating in the last three automated elections -- 2010, 2013, and 2016," he added.

On Tuesday, the Comelec declared the entire Mindanao; the entire province of Abra; Jones, Isabela; and Lope de Vega in Northern Samar as election hotspots.

The Comelec said the decision was based on the suspected poll-related violent events in two previous electoral exercises, as well as threats from insurgent groups. (PNA)

Local peace engagements more productive: Galvez

MANILA -- Local peace engagements are more productive mechanisms to attain peace and address communist insurgency in the country, Presidential Peace Adviser Carlito Galvez Jr. said on Thursday.

"Mas magiging creative and more productive yung localized peace engagements kasi yung mismong NPA at saka yung mismong mga members ng mga party makakausap natin (Localized peace engagements are more creative and more productive because we can talk directly with New People's Army (NPA) and members of the party," Galvez said in an interview with the Philippine News Agency.

Galvez said the government seems having a hard time to deal with the Communist Party of the Philippines-NPA-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF) at the national level due to many demands the communists have been

asking from government.

"For almost 32 years that we are doing this (national peace talks), parang 'di tayo nagsisimula eh (it seems so hard to get started)," Galvez said.

He believed that socio-economic packages and transitional justice will serve as confidence-building measures to address the root causes of the insurgency and will convince NPA rebels to return to the fold of government.

"We will change their mindset from being a revolutionary to become normal people who want justice and peace also to become productive. We will transform their collective desire to have a very productive life in the future," he said.

Galvez said the local government units and stakeholders involved in the handling of problems at the ground level will be consulted and included in the negotiations.

He said the Executive Order 70 issued by President Rodrigo R. Duterte on Dec. 4, 2018 to institutionalize a whole-of-nation approach in attaining peace, will be beneficial in local peace engagements.

"Ang kagandahan nito (The good thing about this) is during the negotiation kasama lahat yung (all) Cabinet members (are part of it)," he said.

Galvez, meanwhile, clarified that the peace talks are not terminated, saying members of the government negotiating panel will be reconstituted after the Joint National Peace and Order Council agreed to pursue localized peace engagements instead.

On Wednesday, Malacañang confirmed the termination of the appointments of government peace negotiators with communist rebels "in view of the termination of the peace negotiations" with the CPP-NPA-NDF.

Galvez said Duterte intends to honor previous agreements entered into by the government.

"The President really wanted to honor yung (the) previous commitments natin sa kanila (of the government with rebels). Lagi niyang sinasabi sa amin sa (He always tells us in the) Cabinet meeting that he is honor-bound to uphold what are the agreements that have

been settled and signed by the government," he said.

He mentioned the rejectionist faction of the CPP-NPA in the early 2000s as one of the early examples of local peace engagements.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) earlier said they are always supportive of localized peace talks in addressing the local root causes of insurgency. (PNA)

PAO to continue assisting kin of slain Cebu lass

MANILA--- The Public Attorney's Office (PAO) will continue to assist the family of the teenage girl who was murdered in Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu last March 11, an official said Thursday.

PAO forensics chief Erwin Erfe said they will continue to help the victim's family even as the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) already named a suspect in the killing of 16-year-old Christine Lee Silawan.

Meanwhile, PAO chief Persida Rueda-Acosta said that since they would be providing legal assistance to Silawan's family, they could no longer represent any of the suspects in the case.

"It cannot be that the victim and the suspect would have the same lawyer... It's a first come, first serve," Acosta said.

The Philippine National Police has initially processed two witnesses in their custody, including a mute person even as the NBI reportedly filed murder case against a 17-year-old boy, who is allegedly a suspect in the death based on the footages of the close circuit television (CCTV) and exchange of conversation on Facebook.