

COLUMNISTS

Philippines: The frantic race to save our seafarers' jobs

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The globalization of educational standards has finally caught up with us in a painful and jarring way. Filipino seafarers, particularly at the officer level, may soon be banned from working aboard European ships because their training does not meet the global standards set in the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW).

Contrary to the view that there is no danger this will happen soon, my sense is that we are facing a very serious emergency. Diplomatic appeals may buy us a little more time, at most a year. But unless we can radically get our act together in the coming months, there's no way we can avoid the dreaded cancellation of our status as a source of qualified maritime officers. At stake are the jobs of about 50,000 Filipinos currently occupying high-paying positions in European Union ships.

Since 2006, inspectors from the European Maritime Safety Agency (Emsa), on a mandate from the EU, have repeatedly, and in great detail, pointed out serious deficiencies in the way we train and certify maritime officers. In response, we have pledged to implement corrective measures, such as revisions in the curricula and teaching methods.

Successive audits performed by the Emsa in 2010, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2017 have, however, found these deficiencies to be recurrent, and the corrective measures ineffective. The persistence of these deficiencies indicates a fundamental weakness not only in the entire system of maritime education, but also in the capacity of government to monitor, evaluate, and upgrade the country's maritime educational institutions. The two principal agencies of the government that have borne the onus of this responsibility are the Maritime Industry Authority (Marina) and the Commission on Higher Education (CHED).

While the looming withdrawal of EU recognition (given in 2002) of Filipino seafarers' qualifications concerns mainly those working as officers and officers in charge in EU-flagged ships, a negative judgment on the overall quality of our maritime education is certain to shape perceptions of the competence of all our seamen who work as ratings and support staff in European and other foreign vessels. Worse, it may imperil our standing in the International Maritime Organization, which maintains a "white list" of countries allowed to deploy certified maritime workers.

For too long have we rested on the belief that our people are able to dominate the world's seaborne occupations because of their proficiency in English, their inherent likeability, and readiness to work long hours for less pay. Indeed, these traits largely explain the preferential treatment Filipino seafarers have enjoyed everywhere.

But no country that sends out tens of thousands of new seafarers every year, in addition to the more than half a million already out there, can avoid being asked if it has the capacity to train these

seafarers as adequately as it rapidly deploys them.

In the maritime industry, safety is of the utmost importance. One is hard-pressed to think of comparable areas in the field of education where the knowledge, competencies, and skills expected of every graduate are as explicitly defined as in maritime education.

The STCW is the gospel of maritime education. It comes with a codebook containing tables of competencies, knowledge, and proficiencies, and detailed criteria for assessment and evaluation.

It is this codebook that serves as the Emsa's principal reference when it assesses the country's maritime education and training system. Over a period of two to three weeks, its inspection teams visit maritime higher education institutions, observe classes, inspect equipment, and pore over curricula and various academic records. They review the procedures followed by government regulatory agencies, notably Marina and CHED.

The inspection report they write after every visit contains detailed observations of the country's compliance with relevant provisions of the STCW. Philippine authorities are given a chance to look at the draft, challenge the findings, and offer amendments. Reading these audit reports, a lay person operating in our cultural milieu might easily think the whole exercise amounts to nitpicking. But no one working in this field can dispute the disciplined professional effort that goes into these reports.

The European Commission, acting on behalf of the EU, has carefully reviewed the findings of the 2020 Emsa audit. Reiterating the key deficiencies identified by the audit team, it has concluded that the current level of training of our seafarers does not guarantee safety of navigation at sea. It has called on the Philippine government to submit a detailed plan of corrective measures and a precise timetable for their adoption and actual enforcement. At a recent House hearing, a Marina official confirmed that it submitted the Philippines' Final Report of Compliance last March 2022.

As dire as it is, the situation we face is a complex one. In a lot of ways, the problems that hobble maritime education are the same ones that bug the country's entire education system. My fellow sociologist, Dr. Cynthia Banzon-Bautista, who served as oversight CHED commissioner for maritime education from 2012 to 2016, suspects that, at the bottom, the problem stems from our inability to incorporate the 1990s paradigm shift from a lectures-based learning system to competency and outcomes-based education, which is the hallmark of the European codebook for maritime training.

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P.S.

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