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(MENAFN - Arab News) THE Philippines and Saudi Arabia enjoy strong bilateral ties as the Filipinos in the Kingdom and other countries celebrate their 115th Independence Day anniversary.

"As we mark our Independence Day anniversary, Philippine-Saudi relations are at their best since the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries," Ambassador Ezzedin H. Tago told Arab News.

The two countries have good relations in all areas including diplomatic, economic, cultural and education.

At present, there are some 674,000 Filipinos working in the Kingdom, according to the Saudi Ministry of Interior. Many of them are skilled workers or professionals in business and industry.

The Philippines and Saudi Arabia have just signed a bilateral labor agreement involving Filipino household service workers (HSW). Such accord is deemed beneficial to both countries.

Labor Secretary Rosalinda Dimapilis-Baldoz visited the Kingdom to sign the agreement on May 19 with

Saudi Deputy Labor Minister Mufarrej bin Saad Al-Haqbani, who signed on behalf of Labor Minister Adel Fakeih.

The agreement was the first for the Kingdom with a manpower-supplying country. It sets the rights and obligations of the employee and employers as well as the recruitment agencies from both countries.

Amb. Tago had earlier met with Saudi Labor Minister Adel Fakeih in March this year and they discussed the state of labor relations.

He conveyed the Philippine government's appreciation of the excellent support and hospitality extended to all Filipinos working in Saudi Arabia.

Fakeih said Filipinos are among the most peaceful and least problematic communities in the Kingdom while Amb. Tago noted "many Filipinos have made Saudi Arabia their second home and have been working in the Kingdom for years."

On March 23, Amb. Tago met with Riyadh Gov. Prince Khaled bin Bandar, who too lauded Filipino expatriates for their well-earned reputation as efficient workers. Riyadh Deputy Gov. Prince Turki bin Abdulaziz was present during the meeting.

"For decades, the Saudi people have known Filipinos who have contributed to the national development of the Kingdom. They have shown respect for the culture and laws of Saudi Arabia," he said.

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Amb. Tago thanked the Riyadh governor and his deputy for "the harmonious relations between the Philippines and Saudi Arabia and for the excellent treatment extended to Filipinos..."

The ambassador also thanked Prince Khaled bin Bandar for the humanitarian consideration extended to the irritant Filipinos in the Riyadh region and the regular clemency granted to the detained Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

The Kingdom has been assisting the Philippines by providing loans for the funding of three major projects in key provinces. The Saudi government has allocated 40,000 as financial assistance for various agencies helping in the Mindanao peace program. Last year, the Saudi government donated funds to build some 10,000 new houses for the victims of typhoon Pablo in Mindanao.

The Filipino envoy also said that on the political front, the bilateral ties are stable.

The Kingdom has supported Philippine candidature in the UN and other international organisations

In February this year, Shoura Council Chairman Abdullah Al-Sheikh joined high-level Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) conference in Manila.

"The high-level participation of Dr. Al-Sheikh reflects our strong bilateral relations as well as Saudi Arabia's commitment to fight corruption, just like the Philippines," Tago said.

Filipinos are studying Arabic, Islamic law and theology in the Kingdom. A university in Riyadh is offering scholarship to its Filipino staff. In the cultural sector, thousands of Filipino pilgrims have been traveling to the Kingdom to perform Haj and umrah. Eight thousand Filipino pilgrims will perform Haj this year, up from 6,000 last year.

In trade, Saudi Arabia ranked 10th as the Philippines' trading partner in 2012, 31st as export market (up four notches in 2011, when it was 35th as export market) and 8th as import supplier.

During the same period, Saudi Arabia both ranked first as the Philippines' trading partner and import supplier, and ranked second as export market in the Middle East.

Prince Alwaleed bin Talal's Kingdom Hotel Investments (KHI) infused a 200-million capital in 2007 in a project in Makati City, which also includes residential units. The 280-room Fairmont Hotel, a 32-suite Raffles Hotel and 237-room Raffles-branded private residences in Makati has been formally opened.

Filipinos have also invested in the Kingdom in cargo forwarding, restaurants, supermarket, among many others.



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