



Republic of the Philippines
SENATE
Pasay City

**JOINT CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE ON
ABSENTEE VOTING**

*Senator Ambrosio Padilla Room
December 13, 2004
1:00 p.m.*

AGENDA

- **Adoption of the Rules of the Oversight Committee**
- **Briefing of the Commission on Elections and Department of Foreign Affairs as to the conduct of the Overseas Absentee Voting**

Members Present: Senator Richard J. Gordon, chairman, Senate panel, Senator Rodolfo G. Biazon, Representative Teodoro L. Locsin, Jr., chairman, House panel, Representative Salacnib Baterina, Representative Arthur Defensor, Representative Florencio Noel

Senators represented: Senator Aquilino Q. Pimentel, Jr.

Resource Persons: Hon. Florentino A. Tuason, Jr., commissioner, Commission on Elections and chairman, Committee on Overseas Absentee Voting, Hon. Leonides Caday, Officer-in-charge, Undersecretary for Special Concerns, and Ms. Catherine P. Maceda, vice-president, Overseas Absentee Voting Secretariat.

=====

HIGHLIGHTS

At 1:36 p.m., Senator Biazon, acting chairman, Senate panel and Representative Locsin, chairman, House panel called the meeting to order.

Talking about his visit in London and United Nations last October for a conference where 13 consuls-general from the United States were also in attendance, Senator Biazon said that insofar as the conduct of absentee voting in their countries is concerned, he asked them to submit their observation and recommendation. According to him, there was a 90 percent turnout of votes in Cuba.

Thus, Senator Biazon suggested that the Oversight Committee should look into the following:

- (1) Conduct inquiry as to the results of the overseas absentee voting; and set standards so as to safeguard the voting rights of the overseas Filipinos; and

- (2) Address the problem of dual citizenship especially the issue on the swearing of allegiance;

Senator Biazon stated that the Dual Citizenship law does not require the swearing of allegiance. He mentioned as an exception those people who will run for elective office or those who are appointed to government positions.

Representative Locsin replied that the Committee would consider his suggestion.

Congratulating the Commission on Elections and the Department of Foreign Affairs for doing their best in the implementation of the Overseas Absentee Voting Act, Representative Locsin stated that they were instrumental in the implementation of the law where absentee voters turnout was 65 percent.

Having said that the meeting was called as an organizational meeting, Senator Biazon interjected and propose to adopt the Rules of the Committee. There being no objection from the body, Senator Gordon, who took over the chairmanship at this juncture, stated that the Rules having been moved and seconded, was considered adopted. He added that the meeting was also called to find out how best the committee could improve the rules governing elections especially for the overseas absentee voters.

DFA Briefing on the conduct of the last election – the overseas absentee voting

Ms. Catherine P. Maceda, vice-president, Overseas Absentee Voting Secretariat, submitted a briefer for the Oversight Committee. Showing the briefer through a powerpoint presentation.

A. On Registration

Ms. Maceda stated among others the following:

1. that there were 89 registration centers;
2. that data capturing machines were based at DFA embassies and consulates;
3. the registration period for seven months was finished in two (2) months;
4. there was field registration in 44 posts in 154 areas; and that
5. there were 364,187 registrants

Ms. Maceda stated that so far as seafarers are concerned, the DFA didn't have much registrants because the nature of their work hindered them from registering.

B. Posts with Higher Number of Field Registrants

Ms. Maceda stated that Tokyo, Japan shows the highest number of field registrants, seconded by Madrid, Spain while the lowest was Abuja., Nigeria.

C. Post with Significant Number of Voters with Higher Than Average turn-out

Dubai -84%, Athens - 84%, Singapore -77%, Al Khobar - 76%, Hong Kong 88.363%, Kuwait - 69%, Saipan - 68%, Brunei - 67%.

D. Voting

Ms Maceda stated that the percentage of voting turnout was 65 percent compared to the local turnout of between 70 to 75 percent. The highest number of voters she said was registered by Hong Kong because geographically, the voting center was very near the place of residence and work of workers.

Asked by Representative Locsin as to the percentage of voting in Saudi Arabia, Ms. Maceda replied that in Riyadh, because of the geographic area that have to be covered by only two (2) voting centers, in Jeddah and Riyadh, turnout of votes was 58 percent.

Voting by mail turnout was 44 percent and 8 percent of the ballots were invalidated due to absence of signature in outer envelop. She said that factors that affected the turnout were the following:

- (a) return to sender mails;
- (b) failure to receive mails; and
- (c) postal strike.

E. Counting

Ms. Maceda said that there was continuous counting of votes by the 438 SBEIs. The longest counting was 100 hours in Hong Kong and the shortest was 30 minutes.

F. Canvassing

The slide shows that there were ten countries with zero votes because of the absence of embassies and consulates. These countries are the following: Afghanistan, Senegal, Uganda, Botswana, Mozambique, Yemen, Mali, Paraguay, Portugal, and Norway.



Ms. Maceda also noted that the canvassing lasted for six days in 104 precincts (Riyadh) and 30 minutes in Havana.

F. Factors which affected the registration/voter turnout

1. Registration period was shortened from 7 to 2 months;
2. the personal registration and voting requirement made it difficult for OFWs who are geographically dispersed in more than 180 countries;
3. there were only 87 facilities which served as voting centers;
4. Limited days off from work prevented many from registering;
5. Seafarers found it difficult to comply with the personal registration and voting requirement;
6. Costs consideration;
7. Security risks prevented prospective registrants;
8. Immigrants were disqualified from registration unless they submit a Declaration of Intent to Return

G. Summary of Expenditures

DFA spent a total of P 112.71 million for registrants/voters broken down as follows:

 number of registrants	364,187	-	59.87
 number of voters	233,092	-	52.84

H. DFA-OAV per capita cost; and

DFA presentation showed per capita cost by nature of expense in the total amount of P390 million broken down as follows:

Registration	-	164
Voting	-	226

Ms. Maceda pointed out that these expenses would not have to be repeated should the government conduct Overseas Absentee Voting in 2007 and 2010 because such expenses were for machines, training and some other equipments.

Ms Maceda stressed that the DFA spent that amount because they prepared for an x-number of voters and registrants. Thus she pointed out that when elections would be done the next time around, per capita cost would dramatically go down.

Asked by Senator Biazon whether the more voters the government would get, the lesser would be the per capita cost, Ms. Maceda replied in the affirmative, adding that the government would not expect much capital outlay anymore because the biometric machines, faxes, and scanners have already been procured by the DFA posts.

I. Recommendations

- a. Adopt voting by mail in countries other than Japan, UK and Canada;
- b. Streamline procedures;
- c. Modify registration and voting procedures for seafarers; and
- d. Automate voting and counting procedures

COMELEC Briefing

COMELEC Commissioner Florentino A. Tuason, Jr., chairman, Committee on Overseas Absentee Voting, submitted a proposed legislative reforms on the Overseas Absentee Voting Act of 2003 through a powerpoint presentation.

A. On registration

He proposed the following basic features:

9. Registration should be done solely abroad;
10. On October 1, 2005 to September 30, 2006;
11. Do away with the Affidavit of Intent to Return;
12. The application for certification/registration to be considered as application to vote in absentia; and
13. Provision for certification of transfer of voting venues after 2004 National elections

(a) Personal Overseas Absentee Registration

1. More user-friendly application form which maybe downloaded from COMELEC and DFA websites;
2. No distinction between seabased and landbased;
3. Registration at posts having consular jurisdiction over where applicant resides;
4. Encoding of field entries at Posts; and
5. Filed and mobile registration are fully utilized

(b) Resident Election Registration Board (RERB)

- ✚ In-house ERB of COMELEC composed of 3 senior staff members of the COAV;
- ✚ In-charge of processing, i.e. approval or disapproval of OAV applications;
- ✚ Conducts hearing of OAV applications;
- ✚ Notifies all parties concerned

B. On Voting

(a) Personal Voting

1. In Posts where registered number of voters equals or exceeds 20,000;
2. Thirty-day voting period minus holidays;
3. Consider identified days when expected turn-out is heavy;
4. Ballot need not be placed in an envelope unless required in automated Counting; and
5. Field registration translated to filed voting

(b) Voting by mail

1. In Posts where registered number of voters is less than 20,000
2. Composition of SBRCGs at COMELEC to mail/receive ballots;
3. Accountability of the Philippine Postal Office;

C. On Counting and Canvassing

(a) Voting by mail

1. Counting of mailed ballots at the COMELEC
2. SBOCs, headed by a lawyer, shall be constituted at the COMELEC

(b) Other recommendations

1. Download non-accountable forms and documents from websites of COMELEC and DFA;
2. Briefing of DFA personnel prior to posting and training of personnel from Posts for next elections;
3. Complaints on election offenses should be filed at COMELEC; and
4. 10 percent of OAV budget allotted to voters information and education drive;

Summary of OAV Expenditures

COMELEC's summary of OAV expenditures showed the following:

a. Total Registrants	-	359,295
b. Total Voters	-	233,092
c. Cost per registrant	-	847.89
d. Cost per voter	-	1,306.96

Senator Biazon noted that the COMELEC and the DFA were contemplating on what kind of legislation would be needed that would require amendments to the Overseas Absentee Voting Act. Thinking that the same proposal should be approved by the end of next year, he asked that the same be submitted to the Committee for consideration.

Senator Gordon then stated that the amendments should be done or approved earlier than suggested.

There being no other issues, the meeting was adjourned at 2:59 p.m.

Prepared by Eleuteria L. Mirasol, Legislative Committee Secretary