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# 1997 hits Filipina maid trade

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Fewer Filipina domestic helpers are coming to Hongkong because potential employers are not so numerous, a local employment agency claimed yesterday.

One reason is the 1997 problem and another is said to be the minimum \$1,650 wage for maids set in November.

There are about 24,000 Filipina maids working with Hongkong families. Half of their income has to be sent back to the Philippines every month under a decree issued by President Ferdinand Marcos two years ago.

The director of the Overseas Employment Centre, Mr Peter Cheung, said many of his customers, mostly high and middle income groups, had settled overseas in the light of 1997.

"The other reason is they find it hard to afford the minimum wage."

The situation came to light when he noticed many customers booking one-way tickets out of Hongkong with the travel side of OEC.

The centre suffered a drop in business of between 20 and 30 per cent in August compared with the same month last year.

"I understand some other companies have suffered even more drastically — by as much as 70 per cent," he said.

The OEC, believed to be the largest employment agency in Hongkong, now only finds work for about 60 or 70 domestic helpers a month. The average monthly figure last year was 150.

He said it had nothing to do with the political turmoil in the Philippines. Quite simply, demand had dropped.

"It will be much worse in the future as nearly 50 per cent of employers we deal with do not re-new their contracts," Mr Cheung said.

Another company, Baguio Investment Co Ltd, claimed to have experienced only a 10 per cent drop in business since August last year.

Its director, Mrs Cheung Tai Yuet-may, said 1997, customers' economic problems and the existence of illegal domestic helpers — who have terminated contracts

with their employers and do not wish to leave Hongkong — had brought business down.

"Some unscrupulous agents do offer black market services for those who need maids urgently for a short time," she said.

"Despite the drop, our business remains stable. Our customers are mainly doctors, civil servants and factory owners."

A member of staff at the Universal Corp explained that it was still cheap to hire Filipina maids to look after a Chinese family of two children — despite the problem of the minimum wage.

"It's a bargain compared with hiring a Chinese amah," she said.

The number of employment visas approved by the Immigration Department in August was not available. Last August it was 835.

A department spokesman said 684 visas were approved last July. This July the figure was 589.

But a spokesman for the Philippines Consulate said there had been no "significant drop" in employment

contracts processed and that about 50 to 60 were dealt with daily.

The local consulate's role is to ensure terms of employment are in accordance with Hongkong and Manila legislation.

"We authenticate the contracts to see if they are fair to the employees, to make sure, for instance, that they are not working for too big families and that they have comfortable accommodation," he said.

Meanwhile, plans to introduce amahs from China are still at the drawing board stage.

"Some proposals are under consideration but no decision has been reached," an Immigration Department spokesman said.

The Guangdong Labour Service, which would be responsible for sending the amahs here, had said that those sent would receive training in China first.

An association of Filipina domestic workers in Hongkong said in April that recruitment from China would not hurt their own employment prospects.