

1,000 Filipinas stranded

Maid¹⁹s sent to Macau but find no job, money

By MARY ANN BENITEZ

MORE than 1,000 Filipino maids facing deportation from Hongkong are believed to have been marooned in Macau by a "recruitment agency" that charged big fees on the promise of finding them jobs.

The women, most of whom are between contracts in Hongkong and subject to expulsion under new immigration regulations introduced in April, are unable to leave the Portuguese enclave because they no longer have valid re-entry permits for Hongkong.

The Philippine consulate in Hongkong is investigating the situation but has so far been unable to act for lack of documentary evidence against the agency, Queensland Personnel Services, which has offices in Sanwa Building at 30 Connaught Road, Central.

The manager of the company, Mrs Lorna Wu, last night denied any wrongdoing, saying the women who had been sent to Macau all had valid contracts at the time of their departure.

The *South China Morning Post* has established that the agency is still sending displaced maids to the enclave and that many of the stranded women are becoming increasingly desperate.

Some have now been in Macau without a job for two months and are turning to prostitution, an investigation by this newspaper has found.

Maids interviewed in Macau said they paid Queensland Personnel Services a \$1,500 "placement fee" after receiving a guarantee of a new employment contract in Macau.

They were also charged a \$103 "membership fee" and told to buy their own ferry ticket to start work for an employer secured by the agency.

But on arrival in the enclave, most maids found there was no job waiting.

They were usually met by a man named "Leo", who identified himself as a Queensland Personnel Services representative, and taken to quarters in the Red Market area, near the Lisboa Hotel.

They were then told their

employer had backed out at short notice but that if they stayed on work might be arranged.

Lodging in the quarters was offered at a monthly rate of \$300 per person in a two-room flat, in which up to 11 women were often crammed, said women who had accepted the accommodation.

In most cases, the maids were left to their own devices to find work.

Many moved into flats established by women who shared their predicament and struggled to make ends meet with casual jobs.

Few could find permanent work in Macau because there was a relatively small market for domestic help. In any case, the wages were generally lower than in Hongkong.

"Many of these girls have no choice except to go into prostitution," one long-time Filipino resident said.

The stranded maids were effectively caught in a financial Catch-22: They could not afford to stay in Macau but, as most had left Hongkong because they were between employment contracts, they knew they were likely to be deported because of expired visas or re-entry permits.

The agency was contacted yesterday by a *Post* reporter posing as a Filipino maid who had just had her contract terminated.

She was told by an employee of the agency, who identified herself as Vicky, that another job could easily be arranged in Macau.

Vicky said the agency's charges included a registration fee of \$103 and a placement fee of \$1,500. The cost of the ferry ticket would be extra.

It would take only "two to three days" to find an employer in Macau, Vicky said during a telephone conversation, adding that a man named Leo would make all the arrangements.

Later, when the same reporter rang back and introduced herself as a representative of the *Post*, Mrs Wu was called to the telephone.

She declined to discuss allegations that the company's operations were stranding maids in Macau.

When pressed for comment, she said only: "I do not know."

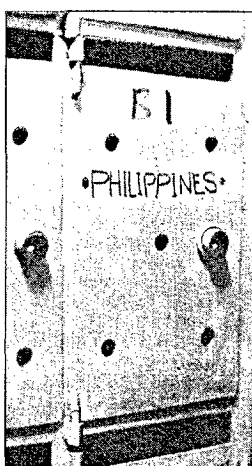
She agreed that the



Pictures by OLIVER TSANG

Some of the stranded maids attend special Masses conducted for them by Father Aidan Conroy.

B1 is home, sweet home, for 11 women



Flat B1 ... home for 11.

company's contact person in Macau was a man named Leo.

Mrs Wu said all her clients did have employers in Macau at the time they left Hongkong.

Contracts were kept by her agency and it was up to the employer to arrange a working visa.

"My girls have contracts. An employer is coming over this week and I'll call you

WHEN Edna, a 36-year-old mother of two, contacted Queensland Personnel Services she believed a job in Macau would be her passport to a prosperous future.

But disappointment greeted her on the Macau wharf. Edna and two other Filipino women "recruited" at about the same time by the agency, kept their appointment at the pier with the man who was to take them to their new employers.

A man who introduced himself as Leo intercepted them after they cleared immigration as tourists, zeroing in on one of the women who was wearing a tag with his christian name inscribed on it.

Then came the bad news. Sorry, Leo said, all your employers have backed out at

the last minute. Forget the job.

Forget the money, too. When one of Edna's companions asked for a refund on cash she had outlaid in Hongkong, she was turned down flat. Leo said he didn't have it.

She was taken to a flat B1, in a building in the Red Market district in central Macau run by a woman named Nanette. Here she found a sympathetic hearing - from the 10 other women sharing her plight and the two-bedroom apartment.

After a week, Edna fell in with another group of stranded Filipinos and moved into a new home with them. The rent, for a start was cheaper. She saved \$50 a month on the board Nanette was charging.

"It's okay here, at least I can sleep soundly," Edna said.

Other women tell similar stories.

Mylyné, a 23-year-old mother of two young children who is still with Nanette, said she and her aunt, Leticia, each paid \$1,500 to the agency.

They decided to try Macau after their contracts, with the same Hongkong employer, were terminated together about two weeks ago.

Leticia said the agency had originally told them work had been arranged for them in the enclave. But they, too, found no sign of this "prospective employer" and are still searching for work.

— MARY ANN BENITEZ

when he comes," she said, when asked if she could produce the documentation.

Father Aidan Conroy, a Macau priest who has organised a special weekly Mass for Filipinas, said he was disturbed by the plight of the stranded maids.

He said he had noticed a dramatic increase in the size of the Filipino community over the past two months, as reflected by the attendances

at the Sunday Mass that has risen from "five or six" Filipino women to 200.

"Finding work is their biggest problem," the priest said, when asked to comment on the situation. "They talk about their work problems a lot."

A nun who counsels Filipino maids, said women from Hongkong were being attracted to Macau by unfounded rumours that do-

mestics were earning up to \$400 a day for part-time work.

She confirmed accounts provided to the *Post* about the operation of Queensland Personnel Services. There was little, however, the church could do to prevent the influx of maids continuing.

Long-term Filipino resi-

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Maid's stranded in Macau

(Cont'd from Page 1)

dents of Macau said they noticed the appearance of large numbers of maids from Hongkong about two months ago.

Estimates provided by the Catholic Church and the Philippine consulate in Hongkong put the existing population in excess of 1,000.

A domestic who has been in Macau for five years said there was little hope many would find work because the employment situation in the enclave was too tight.

"I would take pity on the Filipinas and help them find

an employer through my employer's friends. I do not ask anything in return," she said.

The labour attache at the Philippine consulate, Mr Dante Santana, is expected to go to Macau this week to investigate the problem.

He said he was aware of the recruitment agency's activities but was hampered by lack of documentary evidence.

Many of the maids have confirmed they were given no receipts for their payments to Queensland Personnel Services.