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\$200 boost for domestic helpers

FOREIGN domestic helpers employed in the territory on Government-approved contracts will receive a \$200 monthly increase from today.

The rise was announced by the Director of Immigration and brings the minimum monthly wage to \$3,200 from \$3,000.

Under the new rules, renewal contracts signed before today and which take effect no later than October 1 may carry the old rate.

The last increase was August 1990, when maids' pay was raised \$200. The higher wage will almost certainly spark another surge in the

number of applicants wanting to come into the territory. The Government gave no explanation for the rise, which will make the territory's domestic helpers among the best-paid anywhere. The Philippine Department of Labour estimates there are more than 70,000 Filipino domestic workers in the territory. The number of Thai workers, the second largest group, is about 4,000.

The Philippine Consul-General, Mr Tony Villamor, welcomed news of the increase, saying it would improve the living stan-

dards of domestic workers. He said the Philippine Consulate had been urging the Government to increase the minimum wage for some time. "With the exception of the United States, the workers hired here will definitely be among the highest paid in the world," Mr Villamor said.

He said the territory was an attractive destination for Filipino domestic workers not only because of the relatively high wages, but also because of benefits ranging from days off to protection under the employment ordinance. Maids' grievances were also quickly dealt with by Government officials.

For Filipino and Thai workers, the wages far exceed what is paid in their countries. A Hongkong domestic worker typically makes more than a Manila engineer or senior government bureaucrat. Philippine domestic workers employed in Hongkong are estimated to send annual remittances of \$1.02 billion back to their families. Hongkong is one of the few jurisdictions which has minimum wage rates for domestic helpers. Last month, the Philippine Government announced it would restrict the number of domestic helpers going to Singapore because employers there had been underpaying employees.

In a related development, two officials from the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) returned to Manila yesterday after studying plans for Manila to take over the recruitment of domestic workers bound for the territory. Despite initial resistance to the scheme from local agents, Mr Villamor said enough have now signed up for the plan to go ahead. "As of yesterday a majority of them had signed up to deal directly with the POEA," Mr Villamor said, adding those still opposing the plan only wanted more clarification.

He said contract processing had

slowed considerably early in the week but had risen to the normal 200 contracts-a-day by Friday.

Last month, only 15 of the more than 100 Hongkong agents had agreed to work with Manila in recruiting Filipino workers.

Under the new scheme, Hongkong-based agents must apply for accreditation to the POEA. Only agents sanctioned by Manila are allowed to handle Filipino workers.

Officials in Manila claimed recruitment agencies were charging applicants illegal service fees as high as 45,000 pesos (HK\$12,825), or the equivalent of about four months' wages.