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Manila Standard TODAY

Monday, January 25, 2010

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Child sexual abuse

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Editorial



Poor harvests

The El Niño weather pattern and rising demand from big consumers like India are now exerting upward pressure on commodity prices, especially those of rice and sugar.

First Crack

Fel V. Maragay



Can Estrada still catch up?

The much-awaited decision of the second division of the Commission on Elections ruled on Jan. 20 that former President Joseph Estrada of the Puwersa ng Masang Pilipino is qualified to run for president elicited mixed reactions from various political quarters.



Are We There Yet?

Bong Austero

The unsweetened truth

As someone who firmly believes that dessert is the whole point of any meal—I am one of those who see the main course as just a prelude to dessert—I am concerned that the price of sugar has

OPINION

Bring them home

A child is put up for adoption. A woman who says she is the mother tells authorities that because of dire poverty, she cannot afford to give her child a good future. The woman is dressed in shabby clothes to prove her point. Ultimately, new parents from another country are found for the child. The minor is whisked off to a foreign country, the woman gets a windfall... except that the child is not really her own to begin with. The child's real family has reported a kidnap case.

Chasing Happy

Adelle Chua



Another child is rescued from a prostitution den. She says she was brought to the big city by a woman who claimed to want to help her by giving her a job. She wants to go home but does not know where her family is.

Yet another kid is taken from a sweat shop, where he has been subjected to inhumane working conditions. He also wants to go home, but since it has been so long since he left home, he does not know whether his relatives are still looking for him.

Republic Act 9208, also known as the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003, defines trafficking as the recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring or receiving of a person for the purpose of exploitation within or outside the country. The word "child", on the other hand, refers to persons below 18 years of age.

Trafficking is a serious, pervading crime. The United Nation says this phenomenon affects at least 161 countries which serve as sources, transit points, and destinations of persons trafficked. There are an estimated two million people trafficked each year, across international borders or within the borders of their country. Almost half of these are below the age of 17.

Among these, 95 percent experience physical or sexual violence. Seventy-nine percent are trafficked for sexual exploitation. Eighteen percent are made to undergo forced labor. Other outcomes include illegal adoption, sale of organs, forced marriage and recruitment for militant activities. Indeed human trafficking may just dislodge arms and drug trade as the number one organized crime in the world, experts say.

In the meantime, prosecution of traffickers remains difficult. Here at home, for instance, Justice Undersecretary and Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking acting chairman Ricardo Blancaflor says that out of 750 complaints for trafficking, 400 have reached the preliminary investigation level and only 199 have been docketed in the courts. He says that trafficking is one of the crimes that rely heavily on testimonies. But witnesses, as we know, may be influenced by many things. When the witness, usually the trafficked child, loses interest in testifying, the case crumbles altogether—unless there is forensic evidence, DNA profiles, for instance, at hand.

We are lucky if we even get to the prosecution level. The more daunting first task is to bring the trafficked children back to their homes.

Two experts in DNA technology visited the Philippines last week to see how their organization can tie up with Philippine authorities in using science to reunite trafficked children with their families and eventually deter the crime.

spiraled seemingly out of control since Christmas.

**Chasing
Happy**

Adelle Chua



Bring them home

A child is put up for adoption. A woman who says she is the mother tells authorities that because of dire poverty, she cannot afford to give her child a good future. The woman is dressed in shabby clothes to prove her point.

Haiti and the holy

**by Fr. Ranhilio
Callangan Aquino**

If there is any event of recent history that seems farthest removed from the HOLY, that would be Haiti! The pain and anguish, the misery and squalor that came in the wake of the terrible quake —and the quake itself, horrendous in its magnitude and awesome in its destructive force— seem to offer the most powerful argument possible against the existence of God.

Jose Lorente, M.D., PhD is professor of legal and forensic medicine at the University of Granada in Spain. He is also the director of the Laboratory for Genetic Identification. Six years ago, he established DNA-Prokids (Program for Kids Identification with DNA Systems). He became inspired to help return children to their parents after seeing many kids roaming the streets during his many travels abroad. He wondered whether the families of these children could ever hope to be reunited with them.

Arthur Eisenberg, PhD, is professor and chairman of the Department of Forensic and Investigative Genetics and co-director of the University of North Texas Center for Human Identification. On a forum held at the Malcolm Theater at the College of Law of the University of the Philippines, Eisenberg talked about his job at home before discussing his involvement in Prokids.

His job is real-life CSI and it's nowhere as easy and as glamorous as how it is made out on television. And, after all this time, he still could not feel detached. "These are not just remains," he says, as a slide of bones is flashed on the screen. "These are somebody's loved one."

The duo came to the Philippines in their bid to include at least 13 pioneer countries plus the United Nations in their worldwide crusade. Not many are aware that DNA technology is now already available in the country, and in four places actually: The St. Luke's Medical Center (which takes on only private cases like paternity tests), the National Bureau of Investigations, the Philippine National Police and the DNA Analysis Laboratory of the Natural Sciences Research Institute of the University of the Philippines. (I wrote about DNA profiling in the Philippines in a series of three articles, called "It's in the genes," in this space in August-September 2008.)

The idea is to help partner countries put in place a national database of DNA profiles from victims on one hand and another database for reference samples from family members with missing children on the other. Both data are essential to establishing identities. Aside from database development and eventual linkage to an international network (the child a family is searching for, after all, may already be halfway across the globe), there will also be use of shared protocols for DNA sample collection, supply of technical equipment and training of genetics experts.

Pro kids is also pushing for having DNA profiling a requisite of adoption processes in countries all over the world.

This is to ensure that parents giving up a child for adoption are his real ones.

Eisenberg is also quick to add that the database would not violate any privacy rights of the profiled individuals since the system will only contain reference numbers and will not be used for any other purpose aside from matching kids with their families.

Maria Corazon de Ungria, PhD, who heads the UP DNA Analysis Laboratory of UP, has signed the memorandum of agreement with Prokids to establish Prokids Philippines. She emphasizes, though, that the initiative is not meant to work only with UP. In fact, it was her agency that organized the forum that brought together the IACAT, the NBI, the PNP and other organizations so that Prokids can work with the entire system already in place in the country.

Secretary Esperanza Cabral, who used to co-chair the IACAT in her former capacity as secretary of Social Welfare and Development, says that trafficking can be traced to poverty in the countryside. People can get vulnerable when they are desperate for a better life.

DNA technology in the Philippines is just in its newborn stages but its potentials are limitless. These experts are hoping that science will be used as a tool to help the vulnerable and to bring them closer to justice. The gains will not be realized overnight, to be sure, but when one more child is reunited with his family—where he should be—the work is done, at least for the day.

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