

Torres urges delegate to 'seek stability' on H-2 issue

By **Cherrie Anne E. Villahermosa**
For The Guam Daily Post

SAIPAN - Gov. Ralph Torres is pushing CNMI Del. Gregorio Sablan to use his seniority in the U.S. House of Representatives and address the H-2B and other immigration issues that affect the commonwealth.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has announced the removal of the Philippines from the list of countries whose nationals are eligible to participate in the H-2A and H-2B nonimmigrant worker programs.

"It will affect us because they already took away some of the construction workers on CW-1 permits, and businesses were hoping to get construction workers on H-2B visas from the Philippines, but now that is also not an option," Torres said. "Where else can Imperial Pacific and other businesses get construction workers? I am not even sure how many are left on island.

This announcement is pushing us to an even worse situation."

The CNMI-Only Transitional Worker, or CW-1, visa classification "allows employers in the Commonwealth

of the Northern Mariana Islands to apply for permission to employ foreign (nonimmigrant) workers who are otherwise ineligible to work under other nonimmigrant worker categories," according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Torres said he "would like to ask (Sablan) to make use of his seniority and seek stability not just for H-2B workers, but for our long-term workers, as well as other issues regarding our immigration."

'Surprising turn of events'

In a separate statement, Lt. Gov. Arnold Palacios called the announce-



Gregorio Sablan



Ralph Torres

ment from Homeland Security "a very surprising turn of events, considering that we are (still) developing and recovering."

"The Philippines is one of the largest sources for our

H-2B visas for construction so this is going to have an impact on our economy, especially as we recover. This affects the government, too, as it may negatively impact our capital improvement projects, our recovery and rebuilding efforts, other infrastructure resiliency projects for development. We will be proactive and work something out with our federal partners. We will also work with Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero and Lt. Gov. Josh Tenorio on remedies for the CNMI and Guam."

Guam's main source of foreign labor is the Philippines.

Saipan Chamber of Commerce President Velma Palacios said the removal of the Philippines from the H-2B eligibility list is distressing news.

"This will significantly impact our island's recovery, as most of the construction workers are from the Philippines."

She added that the chamber's membership "has been working to comply with the federal government, and has encouraged construction companies to transition their construction workers to H-2B status as these companies are not able to use the CW-1 visas for construction workers. We also have encouraged the training of our existing U.S. eligible workforce to take on some of these trades; however, the availability and accessibility of training have also been hindered due to the typhoon, and the vast immediate need for rebuilding cannot be solved by (our current) local workforce."

She said the visa restriction "is discouraging, as our businesses have already invested a lot to comply with these regulations only to have the rug pulled under them. Construction companies will have to find other resources to meet the demands that are tenfold greater because of the typhoons which have devastated our islands."