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*In conferring the PAFIOO Kaanibng Bayan Award upon Victor Gaina, the President recognizes his extraordinary valor, profound sense of compassion, and unwavering commitment to providing crucial assistance in the successful rescue and safe repatriation of hundreds of Filipinos from Ukraine amidst the ongoing Russian invasion.*

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## *Victor Gaina*

**Moldova**

**D**iplomatic relations between the Philippines and Moldova span over three decades, a relationship built on mutual respect and collaboration. But it was not until November 2020, with the establishment of the Philippine Consulate in Chişinău and the appointment of Victor Gaina as the Honorary Consul of the Philippines to Moldova, that this partnership took on a distinctly human face. Consul Gaina, a successful businessman and a compassionate public servant, would soon find himself thrust into the role of safeguarding and saving the lives of Filipinos during the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war.

In February 2022, the world watched in shock as Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, plunging the region into war. The invasion, considered the largest conflict in Europe since World War II, has caused hundreds of thousands of casualties and millions of refugees.

As missiles struck Ukrainian cities and civilians fled for their lives, Filipinos who were trapped by the sudden

conflict found an unlikely hero in Consul Gaina. Despite the danger, he did not hesitate to step forward, risking his own wellbeing to bring them to safety.

His appointment as Honorary Consul under the jurisdiction of the Philippine Embassy in Budapest had initially been a ceremonial role focused on promoting Filipino interests in Moldova. However, his duties took on a life-or-death dimension when the war began. Moldovan borders became a critical point of refuge for many fleeing the violence, and among them were hundreds of Filipinos—students, seafarers, and families—who had been living and working in Ukraine. Their lives now hung in the balance.

### **Heroism in the Midst of War**

As news of the invasion spread, Consul Gaina quickly mobilized to assist Filipino nationals who found themselves stranded. Coordinating with the Philippine Embassy in Budapest, he became an essential part of the rescue and repatriation efforts, helping over 380

Filipinos and ensuring their safe passage through Moldova. But his role would go far beyond the administrative and logistical support of his office. His actions on the ground were nothing short of heroic.

One of his most heroic moments came just days into the conflict. The MV S-Breeze, a bulk carrier that had been dry docked for repair with 21 Filipino crew members, was stranded at the Port of Odesa as Russian forces advanced. Despite the growing danger, Consul Gaina brought a bus into Ukraine, directly into the conflict zone, to evacuate the seafarers.

Through tense negotiations, he convinced 8 of the crew to seize the opportunity to evacuate with him, bringing them back to the safety of Moldova. The remaining 13 crew members, fearful of potential liability and legal repercussions from their employer for abandoning the ship, initially chose to stay.

However, as conditions deteriorated, those left behind reached out to Consul Gaina, desperate for a second chance at evacuation. At this juncture, the land borders had already closed, and traveling would be dangerous and impossible. Notwithstanding the challenges, he returned to the war zone, braving attacks and bombings to rescue the remaining Filipino crew. His courage and tenacity paid off, as he successfully brought all seafarers to safety—an act that would later be described by officials as something out of a “Mission Impossible” movie.

### **A Relentless Commitment to Filipino Nationals**

This was only the beginning of Consul Gaina’s efforts. Over the next several weeks, as fighting intensified, he continued to lead daring rescue missions. Through his relentless efforts, he successfully facilitated the rescue missions of the Filipino seafarers from 16 vessels stranded at ports in southern Ukraine, including the MV S-Breeze, MV Global Aglaia, MV Star Helena, MV Key Knight, MV Star Pavlina, MV Riva Wind, MV Star Laura, MV Puma, MV Polar Star, MV Ithaca Prospect, MV Bonita, MV Chariana L, MV Marika, MV Filia Glory, MV Joy, and MV Nord Virgo.

Navigating treacherous circumstances as ships remained anchored in conflict zones, the rescue missions were challenging as the seafarers had to disembark using small boats, maneuvering through the chaos to reach safety. Consul Gaina’s persistence ensured that every Filipino seafarer made it out alive.

Among those rescued was a diverse group of individuals—Filipino students, tourists, senior citizens, seafarers, and those married to Ukrainians—each with their own harrowing stories. For some, his

arrival was their only chance at survival. His efforts extended beyond immediate evacuation, as he worked tirelessly to obtain e-visas and coordinate with the Philippine Embassy in Budapest to arrange safe transit from Moldova to Romania, where the evacuees could board flights back to the Philippines.

By the end of the operations, the Repatriation Efforts Report of the Philippine Embassy in Budapest provided a detailed account of Consul Gaina’s heroic actions. While it was a collaboration effort between the Philippine Embassy in Budapest and the Philippine Consulate in Chişinău, much of the groundwork in the zones of conflict was done by Consul Gaina.

He was instrumental in the evacuation of 297 Filipinos, of whom 258 were personally extracted by Consul Gaina, often risking his own safety as he navigated the dangerous and volatile conditions of Ukraine multiple times.

Consul Gaina’s unwavering commitment to the welfare of Filipinos in Ukraine went beyond mere duty; it was a profound expression of his sense of responsibility and compassion. Time and again, he crossed war-torn borders, driven by the urgent need to ensure that every Filipino was brought out of harm’s way and back home safe to their loved ones in the Philippines. His relentless dedication and courage stand as a powerful testament to the lengths he would go to protect and support the overseas Filipino community during this crisis.

### **An Unlikely Hero**

Consul Gaina’s actions have not only earned him the admiration of the Filipino community but have also highlighted the critical role of Honorary Consuls in times of crisis. A man who wears many hats—businessman, diplomat, and humanitarian—he has gone above and beyond the expectations of his post. His quiet determination and bravery, coupled with his ability to navigate complex, dangerous situations, turned him into an unlikely hero during one of Europe’s most devastating modern conflicts.

His story is a powerful reminder of the impact one individual can have in times of crisis. In a world often darkened by violence and uncertainty, his courage and compassion are beacons of hope for those in desperate need. His actions not only saved lives but also reaffirmed the enduring bond between the Philippines and Moldova, a bond forged through bravery, diplomacy, and an unwavering commitment to humanity.