

# **Philippines: Solidarity and united action in this time of disaster, but systems change is the enduring response**

Statement from Laban ng Masa on the disaster brought by Typhoon Ondoy in the Philippines

Friday 2 October 2009, by [Laban ng Masa](#), [NEMENZO Francisco "Dodong"](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2009).

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By Francisco Nemenzo

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### ***Solidarity and united action in this time of disaster, but systems change is the enduring response***

ALMOST 300 people were killed in the worst flood brought by Typhoon Ondoy (international name: Ketsana). Damage to agriculture and public and private infrastructures has been extensive. Now tens of thousands are homeless, living in packed temporary shelters, dependent on food donations, and with vague ideas of what their future would be, as two more typhoons threaten the Philippines.

Disasters of this magnitude call for a collective response, a demonstration of national solidarity. We in Laban ng Masa (Struggle of the Masses) therefore join the other organizations, schools, religious groups, government agencies, and concerned individuals in helping the survivors. **Let us turn this colossal tragedy into an opportunity to unite and thus emerge a stronger nation.**

**But in the first place, this calamity would not have reached this enormity if the right social system were in place.** There would be no shanties on river banks, there would be no housing subdivisions on natural catch basins. There would be adequate shelter for all, there would be comprehensive disaster response plans (given that we are on the path of tropical depressions and are within the so-called Ring of Fire prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions). **There would be sufficient social protection to also encompass such natural tragedies, which the human-created social system made more tragic.** Because even before this calamity, half of the 90 million Filipinos were already languishing below the poverty line. And the recent devastation is bound to worsen our economic situation.

As we bury our dead, repair the damage, rebuild our homes, pick up our lives, and prepare for the impending typhoons, we also express our deepest sympathy for the peoples of Vietnam, Indonesia, Samoa, and Tonga who have been similarly struck by natural calamities.

We are, of course, aware that these calamities are not entirely of natural causes. They are, to some extent, nature's revenge against a social system that encourages greed, disrespects nature, and disregards people's general welfare. Logging, urban congestion, discharge of industrial waste into rivers, clogging esteros, and brazen disregard of land-use plans by the so-called development companies have made Metro Manila and surrounding towns utterly vulnerable to typhoons and

floods.

At the heart of it is a government unable to enforce environmental laws and regulate private enterprise. Despite our nation's location and history with such natural calamities, the government has built no adequate institutional mechanisms for environmental protection and disaster response. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo—and the system she represents—is obsessed with creating an attractive climate for investments while remaining insensitive to the basic needs of our people.

This tragedy should thus push all of us to seriously commit to the realization of a society that is just, equitable, and sustainable. A society that does not allow people to go without decent work or livelihood, without adequate food and shelter, and other social protection measures, especially in these earth-shaking times. **A society where people live with dignity, disaster or no disaster.**