

# **Philippines: Lessons from Manila floods – interview from the climate-change frontline**

Friday 24 August 2012, by [BOYLE Peter](#), [MELENCIO Sonny](#), [PLM](#) (Date first published: 13 August 2012).

**Peter Boyle interviews Sonny Melencio.**

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*“People’s solidarity is a latent component that exists even in the capitalist system. We have to nurture it and provide an environment for it to fully develop by changing the system.”*

August 13, 2012 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal/Green Left Weekly* — While the Philippines government dithered and made excuses for its grossly inadequate response to the catastrophic floods — which inundated 80% of the country’s capital, Manila — Sonny Melencio was leading a people’s relief effort that brought the first food supplies in days to some of the poorest and most badly effected communities. Together with other activists from the Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM, Party of the Labouring Masses), Melencio went to a string of urban poor communities along the flood-breached Marikina River with supplies collected from ordinary folk, whose upsurge of solidarity was in sharp contrast to the official response.

Melencio is chairperson of the PLM, which is part of a global network of people’s organisations and NGOs demanding that imperialist countries pay for the consequences in global warming and take radical action to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

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**Peter Boyle: With the heavy rains easing it is reported that the death toll is still rising, and some 300,000 people remain displaced and a new danger of disease epidemics is looming? The disaster is far from over but how are the various strata in Philippines society coping and responding?**

Sonny Melencio: Tens of thousands of evacuees are returning to their homes and are facing a situation in which they won’t even have a place to sleep on. Many houses have been damaged, others have been swept away by the flood, and most have mud inside their homes as thick as a foot high. They are forced to leave the evacuation centres, which are mostly public schools and buildings, as classes and government work resume today [August 13].

The poor have been the victims of the flood and will continue to suffer from loss of homes, loss of income (most are street vendors, tricycle drivers, itinerant workers and factory workers who did not earn for a full week during the floods), damaged health, rising prices and government neglect in all social aspects.

There is going to be an extended period of crisis. After the floods, a health crisis is looming. The government’s department of health has issued a warning alert on expected rise of leptospirosis, typhoid and diarrhea due to the flood and contaminated water. The level of crisis is magnified by

pharmaceutical companies jacking up the prices of medicines, especially for these illnesses. The price of anti-leptospirosis medicine for instance has been raised by 750%, prompting Philippines President Benigno Aquino to censure the drug company responsible (but not mention it by name), but stopping short of calling for price controls on vital medicines.

On the other hand, I think the ruling class and the *trapos* [traditional politicians] are heaving a sigh of relief, not because the weather has improved and the floods have subsided, but because they are now free of the pressure to at least show some semblance of responsibility and concern to the flood victims. The media will stop showing shocking photos and video clips showing people's deprivation in the streets and in the evacuation centres. It's back to business for the elite.

### **The mainstream media seemed to focus on blaming people who refused to leave their homes in the most flooded areas. What is this all about?**

This has been the case every time there has been flooding, especially in Metro Manila. Of course, the usual flooded areas are the poor communities that are near rivers and canals in the cities. The TV reporters report on the dire situation, but one half of the report is spent on castigating people on why they did not leave their flooded homes. In the same breath, these reporters mention the lack of rescue boats and overflowing evacuation centres for residents in flooded areas. Those in the studio do the same thing; they join in the fray by prolonging the conversation on how "hard headed" and "foolish" the people are for not leaving their homes.

This is the same *spiel* we heard from government officials interviewed on radio and TV. This has become the norm of mainstream media reporting during this calamity. I think they have been trained to report this way. It's almost like they have a scripted report.

Instead of investigating why there are not many rescue boats and what's happening in the evacuation centres, the media would rather blame the victims for not heeding the government's call for relocation. But this call for relocation is usually just a call. How can the government expect people to leave their homes when no means of transport are adequately provided; the evacuation centres are public buildings without adequate ventilation and toilets; and there is lack of food, water and other necessities that people need?

In Barangay Olandes, Marikina which we visited on the second day of the flooding, more than a thousand residents in the evacuation centre and thousands more outside had not had food for a full day. Our porridge was just enough to feed those in the evacuation centre.

In Lupang Arenda, Taytay, the 278 families in the evacuation centre were divided into 14 small classrooms with around 19 families per classroom. It was only on the third day that they were visited by local government officials who brought 14 cartons of cup noodles and sardines for everyone to share.

### **The PLM has criticised the inadequacy of the official response [see below], and like other people's organisations has stepped in to organise emergency aid with modest resources. There are also reports that attempts to replan Manila to avoid the worst flooding are being blocked by official corruption and indifference? What does this reflect structurally?**

There have been billions of pesos slated for calamities every year. This year, it's 10.5 billion pesos. The remaining calamity fund is around 6 billion pesos. But the release of the funds is open to corruption in the bureaucracy. The funds are ordered released by the president and it goes through the various departments and local government units concerned in cities or areas where a state of calamity has been declared.

In the end, the bureaucracy decides where the funds will be used. It is easy for any official to divert the funds elsewhere. We have raised the demand that the calamity fund be used strategically, that is to allocate a big part to finance structural projects that will control flooding, such as building of dikes, water basins, barriers; modernising drainage systems; dredging clogged rivers and canals; and the like. Now, because of the flood crisis and the impending health crisis, we are demanding that the entire calamity fund be released to finance rehabilitation project for communities, and also to start strategic projects right away.

**At times of crisis like this we often witness an explosion of human solidarity from ordinary people. Have you seen this in this crisis? Can you give some examples?**

The people are showing more solidarity with each other during the flooding. Neighbours help their neighbours; even children helped out by using styrofoam and plastic basins to roam around the neighbourhood and rescue residents who were trapped in their houses. You can see that in many photos. Many people's organisations, NGOs, student groups and civic clubs came out from day one to support the flood victims. In fact, many braved the floods on the first few days, while the government took its time to distribute relief. The barangays (village councils) also became frontline organisations that undertook rescue and relief at the height of the flooding.

**Do you think it is possible to generalise this kind of solidarity as a basis for a new socialist society? What can help this and what are the barriers to such a generalisation of solidarity?**

I think human solidarity is a basic trait of our people. Especially if it's not mediated by people and institutions that want to profit at the expense of others, like the trapos who use the occasion to campaign for the coming elections. The president's entourage, which boarded a truck that waded through the floods in Pasig City, consisted of senatorial candidates in the coming 2013 elections; shame on them. Or like the pharmaceutical companies and other capitalist corporations which raised the prices of their goods to astronomical figures because of big demand.

Outside of these elite creatures and capitalist institutions, the ordinary people responded in the most humanely way. Most of the support we collected came from workers and urban poor residents too. They donated dry clothing, provided cooking utensils and helped out in the feeding stations we set up in the evacuation centres. People's solidarity is a latent component that exists even in the capitalist system. We have to nurture it and provide an environment for it to fully develop by changing the system.

**Manila and other parts of the Philippines seem to be experiencing these severe flooding every year. Is it getting worse? Do you think this is a symptom of global climate change? Do you think the imperialist countries that have a massively greater per capita carbon footprint have an obligation to pay for the terrible consequences of global warming and take a lead in addressing it?**

The large amount of rainfall during typhoon or monsoon season that the Philippines is experiencing now is indicative of climate change. This has not happened before. We became aware of this phenomenon during Typhoon Ondoy in 2009, which inundated many parts of Metro Manila.

What hit the Philippines this time was not even a typhoon, it was monsoon winds and rains, but the amount of rainfall has been reported greater than Ondoy's. And this time around, half of Metro Manila was flooded, not to mention the nearby provinces surrounding Metro Manila in the north and south. Massive flooding in Metro Manila is becoming a normal occurrence and it's getting worse.

There are already reports that the country would have to brace for another round of monsoon rains and winds.

The PLM is part of the network of people's organisations and NGOs that are demanding that the imperialist countries pay up for the consequences in global warming and to take radical actions to cut greenhouse gas emissions. We also believe that persuasion will not work with these imperialist governments, and what the peoples of the world should do is to apply more pressure against them.

In the end, the only solution will be to get rid of the capitalist system and institute a system where human solidarity, human needs and the preservation of the planet's resources would become a top priority.

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### **Support the PLM's medical missions**

A health epidemic is looming in the aftermath of the floods. The Party of the Laboring Masses and its mass organisations are now preparing medical missions in the affected PLM base communities. There has been no move on the government's part to do so in a comprehensive way. While we are calling on the government to mobilise all health professionals to the affected areas, we are undertaking our own initiative as we can't wait for the government to respond.

Donations can be made to assist these missions to Transform Asia.  
Transform Asia Flood Appeal:

Now donations can be made via PayPal.

Go to the Transform Asia website <http://transform-asia.org/> or the PLM website [www.masa.ph](http://www.masa.ph) and press the "donate" button.

For those with PayPal accounts you can also send donations to [partidolakasngmasa@gmail.com](mailto:partidolakasngmasa@gmail.com) via PayPal and it will be sent directly to the Transform Asia flood appeal account.

Or donate directly to the flood appeal at:

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Account No. 304-2-30400456-2  
Swift Code: MBTCPHMM  
Metro Bank, Anonas  
Branch: Aurora Blvd, Project 4  
Quezon City, Metro Manila, Philippines  
Email: [transform.asia1@gmail.com](mailto:transform.asia1@gmail.com)  
Mobile No. +63 (0)9088877702

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## **Philippines flood disaster: A political response is urgently needed**

**Statement by the Partido Lakas ng Masa**

August 11, 2012 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — While organising relief activities for communities hard hit by the devastating floods, the Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM) believes that a political campaign is urgently needed, targeting the inadequacy of government preparedness and response to the flood disasters.

The emerging pattern of extreme weather conditions is related to climate change and while the solution to the climate crisis, given its global parameters, cannot rely on countries such as the Philippines, those suffering the worst impact of the crisis are again, the poor in our countries. The biggest calamity is poverty and mass poverty is the most critical and underlying issue that must be addressed in order to protect and save peoples lives.

This means, among others, the provision of secure employment and a living wage, quality and affordable housing, health and education, electrification and water. While we believe that a program of poverty eradication is the only effective climate crisis mitigation and adaptation strategy, we also put forward the following urgent and necessary measures to mobilise the PLM base communities.

### **Release calamity funds**

According to Secretary Butch Abad there is around P6 billion still available in calamity funds for disaster response and rehabilitation. We call for these funds to be released immediately and prioritised for strategic investments in local infrastructure rehabilitation and development. Solutions to the flooding will require massive efforts to improve local infrastructure, such as adequate drainage systems, canals, flood barriers, permanent structures for evacuation with adequate water, sanitation, power and health facilities, as well as a focus on the development of environmental infrastructure, such as the protection and restoration of urban watersheds.

### **Low-cost, disaster resistant, mass, public housing**

All people have the right to decent housing. A public housing program is an urgent necessity to ensure that the poor are adequately sheltered and protected against floods, typhoons and earthquake. The government must urgently undertake a massive public housing program to provide low-cost and disaster resistant housing in urban poor communities.

Land prices in Metro Manila and other major centres should be regulated to provide greater residential options for the people. The floods and other calamities must not be used as a reason to start demolitions of squatter areas and poor communities. We continue to call for a moratorium on demolitions until suitable relocation programs are put in place, prioritizing on-site, in-city relocation.

### **Health care**

Adequate health care provisions must be prioritised as a central aspect of disaster response and preparedness. We call on the government to immediately mobilise all available health-care professionals and other resources to attend to families in evacuation centres and flood affected communities.

An immediate price ceiling needs to be enforced on essential drugs. Unscrupulous speculators in essential drugs should be jailed, such as those drug companies responsible for increasing the cost of drugs to treat leptospirosis by 750% during the calamity. In the mid-term the government must commit to establishing a genuine system of universal and quality health care, based on preventative approaches and decentralised delivery systems, affordable to all.

### **Culture of preparedness**

The government has to foster a culture of safety, of disaster prevention and preparedness, rather than disaster response. This requires a massive information and education campaign to be launched in schools, communities and the public at large, ranging from the problems and vulnerabilities related to climate change impacts and practical steps focussed on strengthening disaster preparedness. We need a properly educated population, with a high-level of understanding and awareness of the issues, responsibilities of various government agencies and their own rights.

### **Community control**

The people, the local communities, must be in control. Community members have to be involved in the decision making, in the planning and preparation and in budgeting, based on participatory budgeting and decision-making processes, such as peoples assemblies. The Barangay councils, for example, must be transformed into peoples assemblies involving all the households in the Barangay.

These short-term and mid-term measures require a massive redistribution of wealth, from the billionaires and their political representatives, to the tens of millions of the poor.

The PLM believes that a fundamental transformation of our political system is necessary, starting with the establishment of a government committed to the dismantling of elite rule - the rule of the handful of big capitalist families who run this country and control its political institutions.

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**P.S.**

\* <http://links.org.au/node/2984>