

Statement (Philippines): Unprepared and Criminally Incompetent - On the Duterte Administration and Disaster Preparedness

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The scale of the disaster wrought by three successive typhoons still has to be fully grasped but the images of utter desperation of people begging for rescue from rooftops all over Luzon, from Catanduanes to Cagayan, spell the story much better than the numbers. These images are far worse than those fictional scenes conjured in the film “Waterworld.”

Harry Sings While Luzon Drowns

A picture is indeed worth a thousand worlds. The photo of Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque singing raucously in a Baguio nightclub with ass-licking Duterte partisans egging him on, as unknown numbers of people in neighboring Cagayan Province remained isolated and un-rescued from rising floodwaters, says it all. So does the shot of the President riding in a helicopter far above flooded Metro-Manila, majestically surveying the scene and later issuing a statement that “I would like to swim with you down there but my staff prevented me from doing so.” This is Malacanang’s version of Nero’ strumming the lyre while Rome burned.

The incompetence and callousness with which this administration has dealt with the worst disaster of the last four years are nothing short of criminal, and there is simply no excuse for this behavior. Certainly, Roque’s justifying his singing while flood waters were rising—that he was simply “unloading...after a hectic week”—will earn him nothing but contempt.

Woefully Unprepared

This administration has not taken disaster-preparedness seriously, and the most glaring evidence of this is the fact that the Duterte Congress allocated P4 billion less for the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) this year compared to 2019.

To be sure, this administration is simply following the cavalier way its predecessors have ignored the needs of the people for disaster preparedness. Instead of devoting resources to preparing more and better evacuation centers, stocking up on adequate food supplies, and ensuring that rescue and

rehabilitation equipment and personnel can immediately meet any contingency, funds have been wasted on pork barrel allocations, presidential intelligence funds, and anti-people programs like the National Task Force to End Communist Local Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC), an anti-insurgency agency engaged in red-tagging people like Catriona Gray, Angel Locsin, Lisa Soberano, and many ordinary, defenseless citizens, which is being financed to the tune of 19.1 billion pesos. With lack of funds and attention, the absence of any central authority to coordinate and calibrate the release of flood waters of the country's hydroelectric and irrigation dams to prevent overflow was not surprising. Rainfall from the typhoons alone cannot explain the massive flooding of Metro-Manila, Central Luzon, and Cagayan, as almost all local government officials interviewed on television have attested. An important contributing factor was the almost simultaneous releases of water from dams owing to fragmented authority that should have been centralized long ago.

Wrong Priorities

The incompetence in dealing with people's real needs contrasts with the efficiency with which the regime has subjected some 27,000 people to extra-judicial execution, monopolized political power, rammed through the so-called Anti-Terrorism Law, and eroded freedom of the press. In this connection, it must be pointed out that the president's vengeful denial of a franchise to ABS/CBN crippled what had been an important part of the country's early warning and relief system.

Local Government Units should not be relying mainly on civil society organizations like the Red Cross for rescue or begging private sector entities for rehabilitation funds. The National Government should lead decisively in this process, instead of tailing behind voluntary efforts or simply staying stupefied on the wayside like Duterte's appointees in key government agencies who could have made a difference had they not been oblivious to people's needs.

Making Excuses

Ironically, there's much praising by Duterte's partisans of the resilience of the people, as a way of brushing off the manifest inadequacy of the government response. While the science of resilience involves the coverage of and access to physical and social infrastructure, as well as essential public services, such as electricity, communications, water, transport, health systems, an essential element of resilience is good governance, which requires political will. Without good governance resilience cannot be built. What completely undermines the resilience of the people is the absence of good governance and political will, as demonstrated by the abject failure of this government to mount any meaningful response to the disasters.

Like his partisans' glorification of resilience, Duterte has tried to palm off the blame on those countries responsible for climate change owing to their massive carbon emissions. Certainly, global warming has contributed to the rising frequency and magnitude of typhoons and hurricanes and the big carbon emitters must be called out for this. But meanwhile climate change is a fact, and one cannot simply wait for the climate culprits to reverse their policies. A responsible government prepares for the worst, and this is where the Duterte administration has so miserably failed and must be taken to task for.

The waterworld disaster comes on the heels of the administration's simply giving up on containing the Covid-19 pandemic that many of our neighboring countries have already brought under control. It is time for citizens to stop fooling themselves about the character and record of this criminally incompetent regime. It is time for them to demand accountability for its succession of spectacular

failures.

Resignation is the Only Option

A government that cares for its people, prepares them for disasters, spends for their needs, and moves to end the poverty and inequality that plague our society is possible. But citizens must engage in the hard work of bringing it about. And the first order of business is to throw out rascals like Duterte and his blundering subordinates who have brought the country to its knees.

Those students who have called for a mass student strike are on the right path, and Laban ng Masa supports them. Indeed, it is time for all of us to finally make that long overdue demand: Duterte, resign, and take your cabinet of criminally incompetent cronies and clowns along with you.

Statement of Laban ng Masa

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