

Philippines after Haiyan/Yolanda: A Storm Surge of Hope

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The Super Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) which unleashed 315 kilo meter per hour winds and tsunami-like storm surges has literally brought down to its knees the regions in central part of the Philippines [second version including a number of corrections.].

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Almost a month since the November 8, 2013 infamous day, destructive effects and devastating impact of this climate monster on people and areas show no sign of abating. The number of dead persons has reached almost seven thousand now and still increasing in spite of the efforts of the Aquino administration to limit the number of deaths by making it hard to register the number of dead to the local authority, which will make the confirmation before officially registering the additional number of the dead. The number of the missing persons has reached more than two thousand and increasing as more and more families have presented only now their missing loved ones to authorities.

The killer typhoon has wrecked dozens of towns and left more than four million survivors, needing emergency assistance including 125,000 who remain in evacuation centers based on figure of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC). Hundreds of thousands of families remain displaced and an estimated 5,000 people are believed to be fleeing the hard hit central islands of Leyte and Samar every day for the main cities of Cebu, Manila and Mindanao.

For those who have remained in these devastated areas, they have yet to adjust to the lives permanently altered by the monster storm. Their lives already made impoverished by extractive industries and politics driven development programs that make their regions among the poorest in the country.

Today, more than ever, protection and humanitarian assistance are needed to ensure that no more lives will be taken by the consequence of the devastating and murderous typhoon.

However, with the scope and depth of destruction and devastation on lands and coastal areas the core livelihoods of 90% of the population were hit bull's eye. A case in point here is in Region 8 (Samar and Leyte), there are 72 million coconut trees and 33.882 million were destroyed by Super Typhoon Yolanda. Ninety (90%) of the population rely on coconut industry for their livelihood. This is not saying yet about the fishing industry and the coastal resource that did receive severe beating and a significant number of the population in the region rely their livelihood. Almost 50% of the population in the region has no employment and livelihood and currently rely mainly on relief

assistance to survive.

Therefore, while humanitarian protection and assistance are very important for the immediate needs of the survivors building and sustaining their lives are equally important in the process of rehabilitation of both the severely affected natural and human resources. They simply could not depend on humanitarian assistance forever. They have to work for their living so as not only to answer their basic needs but most importantly to maintain their dignity as human beings do. Their being climate change victims and survivors do not mean they become less human and object of opportunistic activities by others.

A Storm Surge of Aids can produce a Tsunami of Corruption

Wave upon wave of relief goods and humanitarian assistance have been sent and received by the country through its different instrumentalities and yet considerable number of Yolanda Survivors has complained not to receive them for almost a month now.

Various reasons are given by authorities to justify the non-delivery of relief goods such as they are in the process of repacking and establishing a system of distribution.

The paralysis of the Local Government Units (LGUs) because they have been victims themselves has contributed to the slowness of the government response to the disaster. The National government units could not do much for their model of disaster response is very much tied up to the local government structures. The inaction of the government (national and local) to make mitigating response in the first few days/weeks made valid the observations of the International Media that they could not see the government doing something to the victims and the survivors of the Super Typhoon.

However, as things began to settle, a stark reality begins to emerge that is the relief goods have become fortune for few enterprising politicians. Some of that humanitarian assistance has found their way to commercial places in Metro Manila. The “meals ready to eat”, with still their labels of donation from the Department of Defense the United States of America are sold in commercial stores in Metro Manila. The corrupt officials have sold the “ready to eat meals” and convert them into a fortune.

This prompted the US officials in the Philippines to review their methods of donating goods. In fact, they are considering giving directly to the survivors and bypassing the concerned government agencies. There are also cases where the donated clothes from international donors have been found in the open popular commercial places e.g. “Ukay-ukay” (second hand clothes are sold).

Such surge of shameful activities and the billions of pesos pouring in for the rehabilitation and the reconstruction of the regions could have prompted President Noy Aquino (PNoy) to appoint somebody outside his cabinet (official political family) former Senator Ping Lacson as Rehabilitation and Reconstruction czar for the Rebuilding of Samar and Leyte and other Visayas islands. The former Senator has not been linked to any corruption issues when he was the Philippine National Police Chief and when he was a member of the Philippine Senate. He became famous because he did not avail himself with the several billions of pesos of pork barrel in all his terms (9 years) in the Senate. He is also known to mean business when he was running after the criminal and crooks in the country. In fact, some referred to him as “murderous crusader but not crusading crook”.

Lacson’s appointment therefore is a clear sign that PNoy is very much aware that the rehabilitation and reconstruction works are in danger of falling into corrupt hands of some government officials.

This is also to correct the mishandling and weakness of his government in responding to the disastrous effects of the typhoon in the first weeks that could define his Presidency as one of the International media personality asked PNoy.

However, Lacson should consider, at all times that, respect for Human Rights is paramount in all the phases of reconstruction and rebuilding. In fact the survivors have not lessen and lost their basic rights because of the disaster. Shortcutting this reality would be another disaster for the victims. In fact, it will be worse than losing properties and loved ones because this time one is losing his soul and dignity as a person.

A Surge of Government Shameful Neglect and Peoples' Desperation

For those who have been on the ground since the murderous typhoon made its impacts, the most vivid and horrendous stories of the Survivors in the city of Tacloban and its surroundings would be the sight of the hundreds of corpse, bloated and contorted and beyond recognition just left unattended on the streets for weeks after November 8, 2013. One could just imagine the stench and offensive smell that have been lingering around and could bring one to the point of becoming desensitized and become numb to your surrounding and the reality in front of you.

Such unfortunate reality magnifies a clear government neglect to make quick action to bury the thousands of corpses in body bags lined up in the streets. It has become political because implementing action of decent burial for the dead would also mean morale booster to the living.

In times of war, the dead of a defeated enemy are intentionally left unburied by the victors to teach a lesson to the defeated and potential enemies that the same thing will happen to them if they dare to fight them again. The message is intended for the living rather than the dead to remind them that they could be treated to similar situation. The political purpose is to defeat the enemy without fighting but demoralization.

The outmigration of people in Tacloban (out of 230,000 populations, more than 100,000 have left) should be understood in this context. Seeing the unburied corpse left unattended on the streets make them desperate, becoming hopeless, and leaving the place can save them from what is left of their sanity. It can also be understood that such action is a manifestation of accepting defeat with its struggle against preventing the disaster caused by our warmed world.

On the other hand, seeing the inaction by the government towards the murderous works of Yolanda can be manifestations of; the government is totally paralyzed so that even the government knows that a super typhoon is coming the government could not relate it to the actual damage. Another possible reaction would be it (government) does not want to think of "out of the box" solution to ensure that minimum loss of lives could be achieved. In addition, the worst thing is that the government has become politically numb that it has gotten lost what to do and abdicated its responsibilities and obligations towards its citizenship. The stark confusion caused by the sheer quality of lost lives and destroyed properties made the government to cling to the only survival instinct it has left to itself. That is its political objective in 2016 could be inserted in this kind of possibilities. The head of the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), who has been known to have its eyes on the Presidency in 2016, would attempt to convince the mayor of Tacloban to give up its function to the DILG so that concrete steps would be done in the disaster stricken city. It is not accidental that the mayor belongs to the opposition and has decided to stick to his party - rejecting the DILG offer.

The government is clearly not factoring in the connection between the dead and the living - and that

not burying the dead would be a symbol of defeat to the living and can only feed to more desperation and hopelessness.

In the Stage of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, such realities would be given important consideration and attention. Efforts at this stage can only be sustainable if the millions of Yolanda Survivors will be given recognition of their basic rights to be heard and their voices are given importance in rebuilding their lives.

The Disaster Diplomacy

Aside from the material, emotional and psychosocial havocs that Super Typhoon Yolanda has brought in to the country, it has also attracted several governments to send their armed forces to help the disaster victims in the country.

Millions of dollars' worth of humanitarian assistance has been sent in to the country over and above their human resources as volunteers from their Navy, Army and Air Force.

A case in point here is the USA; aside from the \$52 million US assistance through United States of America's International Aid (USAID), it deployed 3,400 soldiers, 66 aircrafts and 12 ships including the nuclear powered aircraft carrier George Washington based in Japan. It has delivered a total of 2,495 tons of relief supplies and flown 21,500 people out of Tacloban and other devastated areas. Currently, with their new ambassador to the country, it has pledged to continue with their humanitarian relief assistance.

Such seemingly harmless humanitarian operation by a super power like the US could invite little attention from other global and regional powers as to its real intent. However, there seems to be a pattern on such harmless intervention in the case of the US and its intervention in the disaster-stricken country. Cases in point here are the humanitarian relief operation in 2004 tsunami disaster in Aceh, Indonesia. This kind of intervention helped very much in the peace agreement between the Indonesian government and the liberation movement in Aceh. Another case would be giant earthquake and tsunami cum nuclear disaster in Japan. The US and its military volunteers helped in mitigating the impact of disaster upon the Japanese people. Before disaster, relationship between Tokyo and Washington was not at its best because of the presence of the US bases in Japan (Okinawa) and the abuses of the US soldiers to the Japanese people. Moreover, the US humanitarian intervention has improved the relationship between the two countries.

In the case of disaster caused by Yolanda, the Japanese government sent 1,000 soldier-volunteers working closely with the US soldier-volunteers in the Philippines.

In this kind of diplomacy, as the abovementioned cases would demonstrate, can easily facilitate in the achievement of political objective while not creating suspicion to its rival global or regional power and not creating mistrust with the host government of the disaster-stricken country.

Obviously in the case on the Yolanda incident in the Philippines, the US moves has influenced the action of a global power like China. It should be recalled that before Yolanda struck (even today) the relationship between China and the Philippines has been at its worst because of the territorial disputes. After Yolanda made a strike in the Philippines and the world has expressed their support to the country's woes, China made a token humanitarian aid worth \$100,000. Later on, when it became obvious that the US has been leading the humanitarian aid operation in the country China has changed its attitude, decided to add 10 million Yuan or \$1.6M, and sent its giant hospital boat in the affected areas of Samar and Leyte to treat the climate change patients. However, while doing these

so-called humanitarian activities it has suddenly and declared unilaterally an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) on November 23, 2013. It invited negative reactions from different countries like the US, which declared non-agreement to the ADIZ.

Anyway, if China is learning from the US about Disaster Diplomacy, it does not know how to combine it when political sensitivities of its neighbours or especially with the disaster-stricken country like the Philippines where it tries to have good diplomatic relationship. By its unilateral action in establishing ADIZ it invites more enemies than friends and sooner than later it will find itself isolated, where the countries affected by worst disasters will refuse humanitarian aid from China.

Disaster Diplomacy can be best practised if it can be applied in establishing and strengthening of people-to-people solidarity. People can be easily united because of the disastrous effect of climate change in the different countries. Climate change disasters can be the basis of people to campaign to reduce, if not totally eliminate the excessive carbon emission of most advance capitalist countries like the US and China.

A Storm Surge of Recommendations

In the reconstruction and rebuilding phase of humanitarian intervention, it should be crystal cleared that focus should be placed on the active participation of the empowered survivors and not of any considerations.

Basic principles should be cleared to the government, donors and humanitarian aid agencies that a community of survivors and their families are the main stakeholders of their rehabilitation and that they drive their own recovery.

Local government units with the survivors should be empowered to manage the recovery and rehabilitation efforts.

The multi-lateral donors and the international humanitarian NGOs should clarify their roles in rehabilitation and reconstruction phase. They should not replace the local resource and capacity by hiring and paying high salaries and directly manage the humanitarian operations.

Good recovery should be considered and promote safer communities by reducing risks and building resilience.

In finding relocations, it is best if people should be allowed to return to their previous locations and with technical assistance rebuild safer and better housing where they used to live (unless the areas are declared no build zone).

The building of relocation projects should not cram as many people as possible onto sites. However, one should consider the aspect of livelihood in the planning – such as larger lots of land for backyard gardening and common facilities like workshops. One should be guided by the principle of limited area but maximum production or LAMP. If livelihood is not given importance in the relocation sites, there will surely be a failure.

It is also best to avoid building transitional housing or bunk housing and move the survivors straight into permanent housing. One should avoid making the survivors staying in the bunk housing for far too long.

It is highly recommended that big international non-government organizations (INGOs) should collaborate with the local NGOs, people associations and community-based organizations rather than absorbing them in rebuilding communities and planning new settlements. Their (INGOs) should always consider that they should strengthen not weaken local organizations and capacity as well as make use of all the local knowledge. It is the best grounding in ensuring the sustainability of rebuilding and strengthening the communities and building new hope for the survivors of the climate change disaster.

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