

Philippines: Delusions of omniscience

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MANILA, Philippines — It was fascinating to hear the media's questions to the police at the presentation of the investigating team's final report on the Oct. 19 explosion in the Glorietta 2 mall. Nearly every other question was about the traces of RDX found at the blast site. The detection of RDX, a chemical compound that serves as the main ingredient of the military explosive C-4, almost always indicates the presence of a bomb. But the police had no space for RDX in its final report. Its conclusion is unwavering: The Glorietta 2 blast was caused by the accidental ignition of methane and diesel vapor emanating from the basement of the mall.

Later in the evening, the same inconvenient subject is taken up again by the television news channel ANC's Ricky Carandang in his interview of the police. What about the RDX samples taken from the site? he asks politely. Philippine National Police Director Geary Barias, head of the Metro Manila regional police office, is quick to answer: The traces are insignificant — an "aberration," he says, perhaps conscious that these same traces were the basis for the search for the terrorist-perpetrators and for the award money offered for information in the first week following the event. He explains how the bomb theory prematurely took shape as a result of the media's own extrapolations from the police's initial statements. But, Ricky counters, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo herself said in her TV statement on the evening of the explosion that it was highly probable that an explosive device had caused the blast.

The initial reports indeed supported that theory, Barias says. They were based on swabs taken from the site which showed traces of RDX. But, these swabs, he quickly adds, proved to be insignificant. If it was a bomb, RDX traces should be everywhere. Ricky persists: Can you say how much RDX you found at the site? It really doesn't matter how much RDX there is, Chief Supt. Luizo Ticman, head of the investigating task force, chimes in. RDX, he says, is only one of four elements that go into the making of a bomb, and in Glorietta 2 there were no traces of the other elements.

Ticman's statement echoes what Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno said at the press conference in the morning: "Even if you have two drums of RDX there, because all the other aspects related to a bombing were absent, there would not have been a bombing in any case. So it was irrelevant whether RDX was there or not, after all the physical evidence surfaced."

This phrase is interesting: "after all the physical evidence surfaced." It suggests a delusion of omniscience that sees and recognizes all things. A scientist may well tell him that evidence never "surfaces" of its own accord, and reality never bares itself independently of the specific questions we put to it.

Ayala Land Inc. (ALI), owner of Glorietta, hired an independent forensic consultant to take separate swab samples from the site, and had these samples tested for RDX. "The lab results," ALI said, "which yielded traces of RDX, were shared with the PNP as new evidence last month." ALI laments that the police investigating team seems to have ignored this evidence. "Based on the experience of the consultants we have hired, they are not familiar with any other possible explanation for how such explosive chemicals should have come to the site, except from a bomb."

Director Barias offers a number of possible explanations for the presence of RDX. It could have been unwittingly carried into the site by the police operatives themselves, he tells an incredulous Ricky Carandang. Or by the sniffing dogs brought into the scene. It was a serious albeit unconvincing answer, the best he could manage, to a difficult question. But the omniscient Secretary Puno, who seems to think that the perspective of “a criminal investigation” takes precedence over all other inquiries, could only imperiously dismiss Ayala’s offer of evidence. “We do not really care what the Ayala investigator says. They are being investigated themselves.”

There is no way to argue with Secretary Puno and Police Director Barias. They remind me of the anthropologist Evans-Pritchard’s description of the Azande tribe. They reason well, he said, “in the idiom of their beliefs, but they cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts.” In short, they can never be proved wrong. The conceptual system they use is “epicyclical,” says Professor Max Gluckman, i.e., “self-expanding and readily supplies elaborations which will cover almost any conceivable eventuality.” To be fair, we have to say this way of thinking is not the monopoly of tribal people and police investigators. We see it too in science, where, in Gluckman’s accurate words, “...observations which do not fit the theory may be regarded as ‘anomalies.’”

In retrospect it was perhaps naive of ALI to think it could help in the police investigation. The police probe is guided by its own closed system, as the Australian and American investigators on terrorism were guided by their own. Soon it will be the turn of insurance investigators to visit the scene of the explosion. They too will be bringing in a different set of concerns and questions that reflect their professional worldview. There is a danger in passing off any of these tunnel visions as total representations of what really happened.

ALI says it will pursue the truth in court. But even there, the truth may prove elusive. This is a condition that is becoming sharper in the modern world with its multiple spheres of functional truths — the problem of getting “proponents of diverse systems of thought to meet in argument.”

P.S.

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