

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: A 'devil-or-deep blue sea quandary'

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Published Date: 10:46 PM November 18, 2013

Section: opinion

Word Count: 896

Content:

"When TV crews race cargo ships with airplanes and helicopters, the cameras always win," John Crowley of Harvard's Humanitarian Initiative wrote after Super typhoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan) battered the Visayas.

Planes can fly 24 to 48 hours after a storm clears. And disembarking journalists will pan on the contorted faces of traumatized victims. Reports zero in on the gap between supply and demand. These are facts. But context can slip between the cracks.

Yolanda's winds gusted at 275 kilometers per hour, smashing through the Storm Category 5 ceiling. Storm surges left corpses and traumatized survivors and shattered prepositioned relief stocks.

The massive aid needed could come only by ship. That takes days. The repair of damaged ports and roads stretches into weeks. "But when media focuses on looting and slow aid they miss the point," Crowley added. "Information is aid.... Scaremongering undermines relief effort."

"[T]he Philippines is captive to its geography," commented Jennifer Keister in an article ran by The Washington Post. The country sprawls over 7,132 islands—at low tide. Like many developing countries, it is "captive to political dysfunction." Poverty, corruption, political irregularities and pervasive political patronage gut what is, on the surface, a democratic government.

We saw that in Bohol. The province was ruptured by a 7.2-magnitude earthquake last Oct. 15. And in 1991, Typhoon "Uring" tore at Ormoc. Over 8,000 died, as today's memorial recalls. In 2011, "Sendong" (international name: Washi) ripped through Cagayan de Oro and Iligan, inflicting 1,453 deaths. A year later, "Pablo" (international name: Bopha) flattened much of Davao Oriental and Compostela.

The "blame game," meanwhile, intensifies, Sun Star's opinion editor Bong Wenceslao noted. Critics of President Aquino scour reports on government's response to Yolanda and storm surge-hit Tacloban City, he said. They feast "on every sign of incompetence they've long accused him of possessing...."

"All rules of decency are jettisoned, and profanities are thrown at will ('—hole,' 'gago')."

"Admittedly, government response has been inadequate. So there are enough materials for critics... But to be P-Noy-centric is to distort reality and hide the complexity of the events...."

"As so often happens, the best human stories are those that didn't make the 6 o'clock news," UP mass communication graduate Angiolino Loreda e-mailed. Some in media "make it appear the whole country is exploding," she wrote. "One has to remind one's self of the silent triumph of the human spirit amidst unspeakable horror.... This is the worst and best time to practice journalism."

There are more Yolandas ahead. "We are now entering a period of consequences... in the global climate crisis," noted Nobel Laureate Al Gore. "But the impact of climate change isn't spread

equally... the burden heaviest for countries close to the equator,” the World Bank said. This is compounded by the lack of “economic, institutional, scientific and technical capacity to cope and adapt.”

The “calamity fund” has been doubled since 2009. But the till is near empty, sapped by a series of disasters. What isn’t funded by international aid has to be bankrolled by siphoning off resources from other programs: How many typhoon victims could have been helped from the squandered pork barrel a la Janet Napoles? Ask Bong, Juan Ponce, Jinggoy, Bongbong and company.

The United Nation says the risk reduction laws here are “among the best in the world—at least on paper,” Washington Post noted. They stipulate that seven out of every P10 in disaster spending go to long-term measures. The task for lowering disaster risk falls on local governments. “Some operate like little fiefdoms.” Think Ampatuans or Chavit Singson.

The embedded system of patronage and strongman politics hobbled response, wrote Keister who did three years of research here. “Haiyan highlights the degree to which these pathologies generate under-preparedness and confound relief efforts.... The system is prone to under-provision of public goods and services broadly, but particularly ill-suited to disaster preparedness.” That’s academic jargon for g-r-a-f-t.

Ilocos Norte Gov. Imee Marcos stashed a secret account in the Virgin Islands, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reported. So did Sen. Joseph Victor Estrada. They glossed this fact over in their statements of assets, liabilities and net worth. So, did they dip into those accounts to help typhoon victims? Next question please.

Sleaze erodes “public trust to levels that residents may not obey exhortations to evacuate,” Keister added. (Others) may not believe government will protect their property from looters or squatters if they did. Trust in government is the linchpin.

Strongman politics distorts the distribution of disaster aid. “Disaster response (here) is often plagued by allegations that local authorities hoard aid supplies and distribute (these) only to political supporters or family members,” Keister noted.

Like vultures that scent carrion, profiteering businessmen swoop on aid distribution. “[C]onspiracy theories are an understandable refuge for frustrated populations whose predicament may be the result of many factors, but the persistence of such accusations... suggests they may contain an element of truth,” Keister opined.

Aid agencies are required to work through local politicians and many may serve their constituents with integrity. Keister added. In many instances, aid providers find themselves confronting a devil-or-deep-blue-sea quandary— i.e., having to choose “between supporting political pathologies they find unappealing and trying to help victims directly,” or be zapped.

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