

Headline: Helping ourselves

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Even as local governments struggled to carry out rescue and relief operations in the areas badly hit by Typhoons "Pedring" and "Quiel," Pampanga Gov. Lilia Pineda, in a radio interview, said something I never expected from a politician.

In one barangay, she said, residents had refused to evacuate while the waters were still rising and as a consequence they were now trapped on rooftops. "I sent some boats to rescue them, and one councilman even died while trying to rescue them," she recalled. "But the residents still refused to leave, so I have decided to withhold relief goods from them."

Giving the stubborn residents emergency supplies, the governor added, would only "encourage" them to ignore official warnings next time. I thought this was remarkable given the propensity of politicians to cater to populist whims, including fostering the notion of the "heroism" of local officials. But here was a governor calling a spade a spade, and risking defeat come 2013.

Obviously a governor who wants to remain in office would cater to the whims of her constituents, taking advantage of a disaster such as the floods engendered by the twin typhoons to "prove" her willingness to serve voters. But Pineda has dared try the opposite: "teaching" recalcitrant residents lessons in civic and personal responsibility and refusing to abet their stubbornness which, moreover, puts the lives and safety of rescuers and officials at risk.

I don't know how the situation righted itself, and if Pineda had a change of mind and heart. But in dry land and in sunshine, perhaps the flood victims who refused to obey the government's orders to evacuate will have a chance to reflect on their behavior and how they can better respond in the future.

For to be sure, the floods and emergencies will recur; it is only a matter of time. And if we refuse to learn lessons today, we will have to suffer through greater disasters tomorrow.

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Pedring and Quiel caused a total estimated damage to property of P9 billion, affecting about 2.7 million people, with 56 dead and more than 20 still missing.

It wasn't just the typhoons that wreaked havoc in much of Central and Northern Luzon. Floodwaters spilling the banks of major rivers also caused water to rise to unprecedented levels, with some residents saying they hadn't seen those kinds of floods in over 50 years. Local officials and legislators laid the blame on the release of water from dams. A Senate hearing uncovered at the very least the lack of coordination among the various agencies that manage the dams (Napocor), the overall regulating agency (the National Water Regulatory Board), the disaster response agency (the National Disaster Risk and Reduction Management Council (NDRRMC), and the agency in charge of sharing information (Pagasa) on which the other agencies are to base their decisions.

From my own naïve perspective, I understand that it may be necessary to release water from dams in a regulated manner to avoid an even bigger disaster in the case of dam collapse. But the "collateral damage" may be minimized if only those communities on the path of the released water

are warned ahead of time, with plenty of time to evacuate if need be.

* * *

So the “crimes” of neglect, if they are found to be so, concern not just the water release itself, but also negligence in preparing affected communities for the onrush of water.

That may have been what irked the senators so, that in this age of instant communication and new technology, the Napocor resorted to such a slow, old-fashioned means of communication as writing a letter to the NWRB to ask for permission to release water from dams in the face of a coming typhoon.

As Sen. Loren Legarda said, “If the NWRB did not answer Napocor’s Sept. 2 letter, why did its officials not call, text, or pay a personal visit?” She also noted that the “sense of urgency” is not written in the law, “but surely there is common sense.”

At this point, it seems that people, including our estimable senators, are engaged in a search for officials or agencies to “blame” for the disaster we just lived through. Environmental agencies even got on the case of Malacañang spokesmen for blaming “climate change” for our weather woes. What about blaming both? Climate change is surely the “inconvenient truth” we must learn to live with—or prepare for—if we want to survive the coming deluge, which will only get worse as our planet becomes more inhospitable. But part of the “mitigation” process must be improving the preparedness of government agencies, improving their technical preparations, coordination and action in the wake of natural disasters.

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There are also things we can do in our own individual capacities. Instead of waiting out a disaster and expecting rescue and relief from government, can’t we take the necessary precautions and preparations, making sure our homes and communities are flood-proof and safe, and protected from other calamities like earthquakes, fires and eruptions?

Can’t we prepare for emergency situations, like having on hand a stash of basic necessities like water, dry clothes, candles, matches, food supply and a transistor radio in case of power failure and evacuation?

Families could also sit down together and forge an emergency plan: what to do, where to go, how to protect their homes and themselves should the need arise. Also, we should try to engage with our barangay, town, or city officials to know if and what plans are in place for mass evacuations or rescue operations.

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Preparedness is half the battle for survival. We should learn these lessons now.