

Headline: Beyond headlines

Byline: Juan L. Mercado

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Critical issues can be blotted out by the day's headlines. These include screams of "we wuz robbed" in the Pacquiao-Bradley fight to fallout from the impeachment of the then Chief Justice. Here are some issues:

The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or "Rio+20," will soon start in Brazil. Look beyond the over 50,000 delegates. The core agenda is the future of our grandchildren, on an earth buckling from ecological strain.

Food demand will double in 22 years. Limited natural resources systems, from fresh water to forests, are crumbling while poverty festers. Failures of the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen linger.

Before Rio+20 opens, two significant reports were published: "A Review of Evidence," by the journal Nature, and "5th Global Environmental Outlook," by the UN Environmental Programme (Unep).

Earth may be on the way to an irreversible "tipping point," writes Anthony Barnofsky from the University of California in Nature. "It really will be a new world, biologically, at that point."

Unep says "meaningful progress was made in only four of 90 critical concerns: making gasoline lead-free, easing ozone layer depletion, broadened access to clean water and beefed-up marine pollution research.

"Some progress" was achieved in 40 issues, including protected habitats for plants and animals. In 24, there was "little or no progress." "Clear deterioration" was marked in eight, among them coral reefs. Less than 5 percent of Philippine reefs remain in "pristine condition."

Soil erosion blights 53 percent of farm lands here. In some fishing areas, the quantity of marine organisms dipped by 90 percent. Time magazine named Jurgenne Primavera as one of 100 world environment heroes for trying to staunch the 39-hectares-per-day loss of vital mangroves. (Thailand loses 18 hectares daily.)

"A new broom sweeps clean." Without fanfare, acting Chief Justice Antonio Carpio directed that long hidden Supreme Court financial reports be posted on the tribunal's website.

Among those opened were the once hush-hush Judiciary Development Fund and Special Allowance for the Judiciary, plus the 2010 Commission on Audit report on the tribunal. The court "en banc" decided that the statements of assets, liabilities and net worth of all justices and judges be released, Victoria Gleoresty Sp. Guerra announced. The new guidelines seek transparency.

This is a U-turn from the previous show-nothing-say-nothing policy of the high court. Fuller access is the catchword, under Carpio. He set the example by releasing his own SALNs even before the then Chief Justice was impeached.

Part of the credit goes to Rene Saguisag. The former senator, for years, flayed blackout curtains on the JDF and other funds. Four-fifths of the JDF is ladled out for cost of living allowances.

The new transparency is reflected in website content. The old website of the high court, among other things, posted buffed-up vitae of Corona and “awards.” His Ateneo classmates pointedly recall it was the late Ed Jopson who was valedictorian, not Corona.

“Life is filigree work,” the old saw goes. “What is written clearly is not worth much, it’s the transparency that counts.” For a start, Carpio has redirected the high court toward openness. Much remains to be done in judiciary reform.

Yet, we doubt if the post-impeachment high court will cartwheel once it receives a letter from special pleaders like former Marcos Justice Secretary Estelito Mendoza. Nor will it jerry-rig congressional districts to accommodate a President’s son: Dato Arroyo. As light beams into once dark corners, cockroaches scam. “Well started is half done.”

Look South. For the first time in decades, we have a better than even chance to clean up padded voters’ lists in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

With the cooperation of various citizen groups, the Commission on Elections is gearing up for a 10-day general registration in the region on July 9-18. “One Person, One Registration, One Vote” is the theme.

The Comelec on June 4 shredded the book of voters for all of ARMM through Resolution No. 9442. This was in response to a call by President Aquino to “exorcise” ghost voters. Scientists provided solid data for this thrust.

ARMM claims that its population soared 5.4 percent, more than double the national average. “Is this statistically possible?” Asian Development Bank statistician Dalisay Daligmalig asked equally skeptical fellow scientists at the Philippine Population Conference.

Of course not. But this “impossibility” jacked up Lanao del Sur’s voting population by a staggering 16 percent. The number of voters in Sulu leaped by 12 percent, in Tawi-Tawi by 11 percent, and in Basilan by 8 percent. Maguindanao swept the field by claiming 78 percent! “Ghost barangays” are one result, as in Lanao del Sur. “Yet, it has voters’ lists and precincts,” Namfrel notes.

From the President down to Abdul, there is talk of ghost schools, ghost teachers, ghost students, ghost precincts, and “prefab” certificates of canvass in ARMM, says Fr. Eliseo Mercado of the Institute for Autonomy and Governance.

Today, there is consensus on making honest elections the centerpiece of ARMM reforms, says this Oblate priest. The new technology of biometrics will be used to ensure honest polls. If this succeeds, it’d be a fitting legacy for P-Noy and installed OIC officials led by Gov. Mujiv Hataman.

There, we reached our 5,700-character cap for this column. And we’ve not even touched China: the “Old Dragon With New Teeth.”

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