# Naia’s ghosts

https://opinion.inquirer.net/181644/naias-ghosts

Ghosts of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport’s (Naia) dark past seem to have come back to torment travelers, further adding to its bad image as one of the world’s worst airports.

An incident last week at the Naia has given rise to fears that “tanim-bala”—literally bullet-planting—the modus operandi that became notorious a decade ago, is back to spook departing passengers.

On March 6, an elderly passenger who was leaving for Vietnam with her family was stopped on her way to the boarding gate by screening security officers (SSOs) under the Office for Transportation Security (OTS) who claimed that a bullet casing was detected in her luggage. The SSOs later changed their story by saying the item was in her handbag. The passenger, who almost missed her flight, suspected it was an extortion incident citing the SSOs’ lack of professionalism in handling the issue.

Following the furor over the incident, President Marcos has called for an investigation. The Department of Transportation (DOTr), which supervises the OTS, also acted swiftly and fired the three personnel.

“We will not stand for any abuse. [This] will be dealt with the same result and the same swift action from us, as mandated and as ordered to us by the President himself. We will not allow this to happen again in the future,” new Transportation Secretary Vivencio Dizon said.

## Corrupt personnel

He also warned erring personnel, especially those under his office, that he meant business: “We are sending a message loud and clear to everyone in government … we will not tolerate this sort of behavior against our citizens.”

Manila International Airport Authority (MIAA) general manager Eric Jose Ines said the same thing: “We will not tolerate any irregularities happening at Naia, especially in regard to the security and convenience of the passengers.”

The airport’s reputation has long been sullied by corrupt personnel not only in security but also in customs and immigration. Its poorly maintained facilities and sanitation issues—rodents, bed bugs, pests—have earned it the ignominy of being ranked among the world’s worst airports.

New Naia Infra Corp. (NNIC), the private consortium that took over Naia’s operations in September last year, promptly released a statement to address the new “tanim-bala” case: “To prevent similar incidents and strengthen public confidence, NNIC is working with OTS to reinforce security monitoring, proper screening procedures, and transparency in security operations.”

## Rebranding efforts

Indeed, NNIC’s takeover in September last year has resulted in positive developments improving overall travel experience but much work still needs to be done beyond renovations and upgrades. This “tanim-bala” case will not help in rebranding efforts and only serves as a reminder that corruption remains entrenched in the system.

The bullet-planting scheme, which gained notoriety in 2015 under former president Benigno Aquino III’s administration, remains fresh in Filipinos’ minds. There were at least two prominent cases that year: one passenger was charged with illegal possession of ammunition and jailed for six days before being allowed to post bail, while another was cleared only after she bribed an OTS officer.

The Inquirer later uncovered an extortion syndicate in the airport preying mainly on elderly and overseas Filipino workers. The syndicate not only planted bullets in the luggage of unsuspecting passengers but also questioned their travel papers.

In December 2015, two OTS officers and four personnel from the Aviation Security Group were charged with robbery-extortion and graft in connection with the extortion scheme.

This, however, did not stop “tanim-bala” cases from happening again with another case reported in 2018 under the Duterte administration.

## Window-dressing

These incidents made Naia passengers wary of falling victim to the modus. Imagine innocent travelers looking forward to their trips being inconvenienced by an extortion scheme. Thus, the outcry especially on social media following this recent case is understandable.

Naia’s privatization is expected to rebrand the airport into a safe and modern facility worthy of presenting a good image of the Philippines to the world.

The firing of the three personnel should set a precedent on how the MIAA, which acts as the airport regulator—together with NNIC, and concerned government agencies including the DOTr, the Department of Justice for the Bureau of Immigration, and the Department of Finance for the Bureau of Customs—should handle unscrupulous activities. These entities must also keep in mind that passengers pay travel tax and terminal fees, which will be increased this September, expecting to have a stress-free experience in using the airport.

If these illegal activities are not stopped, refurbishing the facilities would only look like window-dressing to hide the stench from Naia’s rotten core—the crooked individuals who prey on passengers and invalidate efforts to raise Naia’s standing as the Philippines’ door to the world.