

OPINION & FEATURES

Disastrous

AN average of 20 typhoons hit the Philippines every year.

It is rather surprising that the government has not set-up a mechanism to address the need for disaster preparedness. Our lawmakers had to wait for super typhoons, like Ondoy, to wreak so much havoc and destruction before devising a disaster management system in the event of a calamity.

Sen. Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri is appealing to the House of Representatives for the approval of the proposed Philippine Disaster Preparedness and Prevention Act which "seeks to streamline and strengthen the entire disaster management system in the country," according to *Philstar.com*.

The bill has been approved by the Senate since 2007, but remains pending until approved by the House of Representatives. This delay, in itself, is a glaring manifestation of our government's lack of synergy.

And it's not just a system for natural disaster preparedness that's deficient. In an article from *Inquirer.net*, urban planner Felino Palafox revealed that the flood disaster brought about by Ondoy was "not an act of God but a sin of omission by government and private real estate developers."

According to Palafox, "a land use plan titled the Metro Manila Transport Land Use and Development Planning Project that took floods into consideration has been in existence since

1977. The study noted three sites of urban growth that are most prone to heavy flooding—the Marikina valley and its northern and southern parts.

"Urban development is spreading into areas which are, in their present state, unsuitable for development—either because they are low-lying and liable to flooding, or because development is without adequate facilities for the treatment and disposal of sewage (the norm in Manila)

and so will continue to contribute to the severe pollution of areas such as Laguna de Bay," the study stated.

Yet, the government has not done anything to mitigate the flooding and other problems identified in the 1977 study, said Palafox.

An oversight of this magnitude, one that has spanned more than twenty years, leaves much room for introspection. If something as basic and as crucial as urban planning could not be



EDITORIAL

'Deep calls to deep'

"DEEP calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me." (Psalm 42:7)

HUMAN FACE

Ma. Ceres P. Doyo

These words were roaring in my head all throughout last week, rising and crashing like a thundering symphony. Like a movie sound track gone awry. Brutal, majestic, exploding like Mozart's "Rex tremendae."

Like the psalmist and Job, thousands of Filipinos were left helpless in the face of the unprecedented rage of nature that swept Metro Manila and Rizal Province to the edge. There were those who described the tragedy as "biblical" in proportion, except that there was no Noah's ark in sight.

Like many lucky ones, I was high and dry in my Quezon City home during those terrifying moments. But with all forms of media churning out endless images and news accounts of the disaster, those who were out of harm's way but wanted to be connected through various modes of media communication experienced what is called vicarious traumatization.

I went to Marikina last Sunday to experience for myself the aftermath of the great deluge and the destruction that Storm "Ondoy" wrought. I was with some Benedictine Sisters who visited poor residents who were slowly rebuilding and emerg-

ing from the wreckage of their homes. The nuns have a big relief effort going on at their social action center in St. Scholastica's in Marikina, but they felt that something more could be done besides handing out relief goods. And this was to visit quietly, almost unobtrusively, the scenes of destruction. And to listen.

And so we made our way through alleys, walked past mountains of muddled personal belongings on sidewalks and entered some wrecked houses. The residents were busy cleaning up, spading out the mud, hammering away, sorting out things, throwing out personal belongings that were beyond repair.

Busy as they were, they were eager to talk to strangers.

"Come inside my ravaged home," a woman in an alley invited me. "Stay a while, and we will tell you our story," she eagerly said, not sounding a bit defeated. And so I listened without pen or paper or recorder.

Other women emerged from their doors and extended the same invitation, trying to outdo one another in narrating what they went through in Tanong, Marikina, on Sept. 26.

Arm in arm, they said, they braved the neck-deep flood waters, children in tow, until they reached higher structures to perch on. Their re-

prioritized and given immediate jurisdiction by our lawmakers, then how much longer should we wait for the natural preparedness act to come into fruition? The concept of Filipino time should not apply in dire situations where lives are at stake.

And to think the bill still remains a proposal, albeit the devastating aftermath of Ondoy. Hundreds of lives would have been saved through early evacuation and thousands of

homes would've been spared from destructive flooding, if the law had been passed in a timely manner.

The adage "an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure" still holds. At this point, we are already in a state of finding a cure for an advanced stage of illness which ails our government and our society. But, hopefully, it is not yet too late to act upon our shortcomings. (*AJPress*)

maining lifelines to survival—their cell phones—were of no use.

Many such stories continue to be told thousands of times but each story, each telling, is a survivor's own. The day Ondoy let loose torrential waters equivalent to a month's rain will forever be etched in every individual survivor's memory and in collective memory.

But long after the waters have subsided, how do the survivors expunge the terror from their memories? How do the bereaved move on alone after the loss of loved ones? Will the sound of raging waters haunt them for the rest of their lives?

After coming from Marikina, I called my friend, Dr. Lourdes A. Carandang, a noted clinical psychologist and specialist in post-disaster therapy. "Deep listening empowers," she told me. Having someone to listen empowers survivors of traumatic events. Just as empowering is the telling of the story itself.

Story sharing and deep listening are empowering especially for survivors of traumatic experiences.

One should not be surprised to find survivors eager to talk to strangers about something so terrifying and devastating, Carandang added. And it is good that way, she affirmed. Would that there were as many listeners as there were stories to be listened to.

Post-disaster relief and rehabilitation should go beyond the material and economic. The survivors need healing not just of their physical wounds but of their spirit as well. Adults, and children most especially, are vulnerable to the long-term psy-

chological effects of their horrible experiences if no one helps them ease their trauma.

Carandang has been involved in addressing the post-traumatic stress of survivors of major disasters and helping them come to terms with their pain and loss. She and her team of psychologists' field experiences could provide insights in handling cases.

In 2005, after killer landslides and flash floods brought the provinces of Quezon and Aurora to their knees, I sought out Carandang who shared her ground-breaking book *Pakikipagkapwa Dam-damin: Accompanying Survivors of Disasters* (Bookmark). The book was the result of her and her Ateneo University team's efforts (funded by Unicef) to give psychological aid to survivors of the 1990 earthquake, the 1991 Mount Pinatubo and 1993 Mayon Volcano eruptions.

Carandang and her team's "helping manual" could very well have been written for the 2005 Southern Luzon tragedy. It also found context in the catastrophic 2005 tsunami tragedy that killed more than 200,000 in Asia and Africa. And in last week's deluge that paralyzed Metro Manila and Rizal province.

"All persons have inner resources that can be resurfaced, affirmed and reactivated in times of crises," Carandang stressed, "and this can be done through a helping process that respects their dignity even in the worst of circumstances. This is the essence of accompanying the survivors—by being with them, listening deeply and sincerely to their stories, and knowing and affirming that they have these inner resources." (*Inquirer.net*)

Crying over troubled waters

SO many tears and weeping over troubled waters are still seen and heard, more than a week after the onslaught of storm Ondoy. The devastation brought by raging waters has turned subdivisions and road networks into vast, pitiful wastelands. And the blame-game syndrome among politicians and government officials has worsened the pain of the homeless, destitute and suffering victims. Who is to blame for the floods? Laguna Lake Development Authority manager Ed Manda for his alleged inability to dismantle fish pens on the lake? The town mayors who cannot stop thousands of "informal dwellers" (the euphemistic term for squatters) from sprouting everywhere and clogging the waterways? The futile efforts of Environment Secretary Lito Atienza to stop illegal loggers from denuding forests and watersheds? You and I can put the blame on any of these guys, and we don't know when a government master development plan to stop the floods and squatters from ruining lives and property can be developed that is effectively implementable.

The papers have quoted Secre-

tary Atienza as recommending the abolition of the Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA) if the agency fails to clear the lake of thousands of illegal structures, particularly fish pens. LLDA is an attached agency of DENR and is the sole authority to oversee the clearing of fish pens in the lake.

Manda, for his part, told Bulong Pulungan that he was waiting for Secretary Atienza to sue him. At the forum he showed a video film of the extent of flooded areas, of denuded mountains, of squatter communities (the specifically identified a community of about 25,000 families in Sitio Lupang Arenda that straddles Taguig, Taytay and Cainta causing the clogging of floodways and outlets, resulting in the slow flow of water from the Laguna Lake to the Napindan Channel in Taguig into the Pasig River and then to Manila Bay and consequently the flooding of subdivisions and roads. In the meantime, Laguna Lake had risen, discharging from 2.5 billion to more than 5 billion gallons of

FROM THE STANDS

Domini M. Torrevillas

water as rains began to pour beginning September 26. Manda was saying 10 hectares of illegal fishpens had been dismantled, and the remaining 10,000 hectares of legal (with titles) fish pens could not be the cause of the clogging of Laguna Lake.

As if the depression that the floods have created were not enough, the squabbling among government officials has unnecessarily upset President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who asked that Atienza and Manda patch things up.

Muntinlupa City Representative Rufino "Ruffy" Biazon has been quoted as saying that the problems that have been cited "can be addressed, plus the deterioration of the lake can still be reversed, and although the results could be too late to alleviate the current plight of those mostly affected, their desolation should give urgency to the task of saving Laguna Lake and preventing another catastrophe from happening again." * * *

Here are facts about Laguna Lake, gleaned from the Internet. It is the largest lake in the Philippines and the third largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia (in terms of surface area) after Tonle Sap in Cambodia and Lake Toba in Sumatra, Indonesia.

Laguna Lake (also called Laguna Caldera) is believed to have been formed by two major volcanic eruptions, around one million and 27,000-29,000 years ago. Remnants of its volcanic history are shown by the presence of maars at the southern end of Talim Island.

The Laguna Lake is a large shallow freshwater body in the heart of Luzon, with an aggregate area of 911.36 kilometers and a shoreline of 220 kilometers.

The lake is shaped like a stylized "W", with two peninsulas jutting out from the northern shore. It drains to Manila Bay via the Pasig River. There is a large island in the lake, Talim Island, which is under the jurisdiction of the towns of Binangonan and Cardona in Rizal province. It is bordered by the province of Laguna in the east, west and southwest, the province of Rizal in the north to northeast, and Taguig, Pateros, Pasig and Marikina.

The lake has an average depth of 2.8 meters and its excess water

is discharged through the Pasig river. It is fed by 45,000 sq. kilometers of catchment areas and its 21 major tributaries.

The lake is a navigation lane for passenger boats, source of water for a nearby hydroelectric power plant, food support for the growing duck industry, aquaculture, recreation fishery, flood control, source of irrigation water and a "virtual" cistern for domestic, agricultural, and industrial effluents. Because, according to the Internet, of its importance, Laguna Lake's water quality and general condition are closely monitored. This important water resource has been greatly affected by development pressures like population growth, rapid industrialization, and resources allocation.

Government data show that about 60 percent of the estimated 8.4 million people residing in the Laguna de Bay region discharge their solid and liquid wastes indirectly to the lake through its tributaries. A large percentage of these wastes are mainly agricultural, while the rest are either domestic or industrial.

According to DENR 1997 data, domestic and industrial wastes contribute almost equally at 30 percent each, and agricultural wastes take up the remaining 40 percent. The hastened agricultur-

al modernization throughout the region paved the way for massive and intensified use of chemical-based fertilizers and pesticides whose residues eventually find their way to the lake basin. These chemicals, according to the Internet, induce rapid algal growth in the area that deplete oxygen levels in the water. Hence, oxygen available to the lake is being used up, thereby depleting the available oxygen for the fish, causing massive fish kills.

As far as domestic wastes are concerned, around 10 percent of the 4,100 metric tons of waste generated by residents of Metro Manila are dumped into the lake.

Because of the problems facing and threatening the potential of the lake, President Ferdinand Marcos signed into law Republic Act (RA) 4850, otherwise known as the law creating LLDA. LLDA is the main agency tasked to oversee the programs that aimed to develop and protect Laguna Lake. Its charter was strengthened by Presidential Decree 817 in 1975 and Executive Order 927 in 1983 to include governmental protection and jurisdiction over the surface waters of the lake basin. In 1993, by virtue of the devolution, the administrative supervision of the LLDA was transferred to the DENR by EO 149. (*Philstar.com*)

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