

A People Caught in Its Own Dung

Third of a Series by Ado Paglinawan

Part Three: Metro Manila Chairman Killed Flood-warning System

My day will not be complete if I had not read an article from either the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and Newsbreak, both engaged in in-depth special reports, analysis, and exposes concerning Philippine government, society, business and institutions.

My affinity with these two “whistle-blowing” institutions in our society have been aged since many of its writers were contemporaries in the College Editors Guild of the Philippines.

And with the culture of corruption now being championed by no less than President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo herself, I cannot imagine what “truth” will be like in Philippine society without PCIJ and Newsbreak.

Editor's Notes:

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Last week, Newsbreak reported that expensive flood-warning equipment and devices have been rendered idle and put to waste because of neglect following the transfer of flood control from the Department of Public Works to the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA).

Specifically, Newsbreak learned that a flood-warning system from Japan amounting to P1.1-billion has been rendered useless because of neglect, indifference, lack of foresight or simply bad judgment.

To many this will sound like so what else is new in the decrepit state of governance under the conjugal kleptocracy of the Arroyos? But in the view of the Typhoon Ondoy (international code

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name is Ketsana), the idle equipment could have mitigated the devastation in human lives and property brought about by the tropical storm in Metro Manila.

Newsbreak sources said MMDA chair Fernando simply let the equipment suffer wear and tear, without the required maintenance because he thought the cost outweighs the benefit.

Of course Newsbreak sought Mr. Fernando for comment, but the MMDA chairman refused to talk about the now useless flood-warning system, saying he was too busy in garbage cleanup.

The flood warning system in Metro Manila called the Effective Flood Control Operation System (EFCOS), was a brainchild of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) under President Ferdinand Marcos.

It was envisioned to support the vital infrastructure projects that were identified by the Metroplan of 1977, specifically the Rosario Weir. The original function of the weir or floodgate was to control the outflow of floodwaters from the Marikina River to the Manggahan Floodway.

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But after Laguna Lake dangerously overflowed from time to time, flooding all its lakeshore towns, the Rosario Weir was converted into a movable structure to enable the overflow to be flow back through the Manggahan Floodway onto the Marikina River or through the Napindan Channel past the Napindan Control Structure onto the Pasig River

Such a backflow necessitated a warning system to enable people, who live at both banks of the floodway and the channel to get out of harm's way, thus averting loss of lives and property.

The Philippine and Japan governments signed a loan agreement in September 1983 for more than 1-billion yen. Procedures for contracting consultants and the bidding for the main construction work, however, took longer than expected and the project that was supposed to be done in 36 months took almost three times or 107 months to actually complete.

Again, a field survey report of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) dated March 2001 attributed the main cause of the delay to “the period of transition from the Marcos to the Aquino administration.”

The delay further engendered a technical problem, necessitating communication aspect the project to return to the drawing boards. EFCOS planned to use the 800 MHz frequency band, the same band that the existing system of the Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) uses. That band, however, was fully taken up by the fast-expanding mobile communication network, so specifications and design for EFCOS

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were changed to use 2GHz frequency band instead.

Finally, the first phase of EFCOS was completed in 1992 during the term of Fidel Ramos, financed through a Japanese loan amounting to P600 million.

Newsbreak explained that two rainfall gauges in Boso-Boso in Antipolo and Mt. Oro in Montalban, including 9 water stations, were initially set up. Data from the water gauges and water-level stations are transmitted through a telemetry system to the Rosario Master Control Station. From the data, authorities have advance information on any overflowing of riverbanks along the stretch of the Pasig River, thus alerting them for potential flooding.

Considering that the weir or floodgate takes about an hour to fully open, EFCOS also put in place a telemetering system that transmits water-level measurement data collected from various remote points predicting the approximate volume of floodwater around the weir.

An office that will serve as central network for the rainfall gauges and water-level stations was also constructed including a master control and multiplex communications network, relay towers and warning stations.

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The system also alerts authorities on whether to divert the waters into the Laguna Lake for temporary storage or into the Manggahan floodway that was designed to mitigate flooding in the lower arikina and Pasig rivers, through regulation of the water level in the Rosario Weir. M

The second phase was finally completed in 2001 through a P500 million grant from the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Newsbreak said that this phase involved the installation of additional rainfall gauges in Mt. Campana in Antipolo, Rizal; Aries and Nangka, both in San Mateo, Rizal; Science Garden in Quezon City, and in Napindan, Pasig City. Additional water-level stations were also set up and telecom-equipment systems were distributed to the different local government units in Metro Manila for better coordination. Nine warning posts were also installed along the Manggahan floodway, which were supposed to be operated by remote control to forewarn those living near the Pasig

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River

for any potential flooding.

The EFCOS project was turned over to the Metro Manila Development Authority based on a two-page Memorandum of Agreement after Chairman Fernando himself lobbied President Arroyo for the transfer of the EFCOS project to his control. The entire staff of EFCOS was also moved to the MMDA.

But sometime 2006, the EFCOS project was no longer gathering and relaying data, and in May 2008, MMDA suspended its operation due to budgetary constraints. This despite the fact that the data from the rainfall gauges and water-level stations are essential in bridge designs and flood control.

The Newsbreak article quoted Dr. Susan Espinueva, officer-in-charge of Pagasa's hydro-meteorology division, as saying that "inputs from the water-level stations and rainfall gauges sent from the Rosario central office to the weather bureau, serve as basis in issuing flood advisories and thus help in disaster mitigation but Pagasa has not been receiving data from the EFCOS project for several years now."

You know when I hear about typhoons hitting the Philippines, the first thing that comes to my mind was why was nothing in Pagasa's regular updates reports about relative humidity, degree of precipitation or rainfall, and relative estimates in floodwater accumulation in various areas just

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like what we have here in the United States.

A typical online search after giving one's Zip Code, will bear out this basic layman's information for the next 48 hours.

"Tonight: Light rain early . . . then remaining cloudy with showers overnight. Low 42F. Winds N at 10 to 15 mph. Chance of rain 90%.

"Tomorrow: Cloudy with occasional rain showers. Cold. High 44F. Winds N at 10 to 20 mph. Chance of rain 60%.

"Tomorrow night: Periods of rain. Low 41F. Winds N at 10 to 15 mph. Chance of rain 70%. Rainfall around a half an inch."

I mean it is year 2009, for heaven's sakes, and not having this technology is criminal in a country that is visited by no less than 70 typhoons in a year.

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Many have ventured comparing Hurricane Katrina with Typhoon Ketsana (Ondoy) but really the causes of the ensuing devastation were different.

Katrina was faster as it packed a wind velocity of 175 miles per hour (mph) while Ketsana (Ondoy) had only 100 kilometers per hour (kph). In fact by Philippine categories, the meteorologists called it (Ketsana) only a "baby typhoon."

Editor's Note: On August 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina was in the Gulf of Mexico where it powered up to a Category 5 storm on the Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale packing winds estimated at 175 mph.

H urricane Katrina poured over an inch of rainfall in Louisiana for 3 hours and another 0.5 inches per hour over the next 5 hours on August 29, 2005

. On the other hand, Typhoon Ketsana (Ondoy) dumped an average of 2.24 inches per hour for 6 hours (equivalent to 900 ft. at sea level) or the equivalent 6 typhoons over the 3-week period of this September 2009 – in just 6 hours! Katrina dumped 350 mm of rain while Ketsana (Ondoy) unleashed 411mm in a shorter time.

But Ketsana's toll may not even reach half of Katrina's. Why was it that the Katrina took 1,853

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lives and damaged properties worth of over \$5 billion? The simple answer is that the levees of New Orleans protecting the city from overflow from the Gulf of Mexico gave way. There was warning and protection but the precautions just did not measure up to the worst that an act of God could send.

In the case of the EFCOS flood warning system, it was not an act of God. It was Bayani Fernando's wrong decision based on the shortsighted priorities of his office.

So with the deluge, went underwater his presidential ambitions. Now he is thinking correctly, as he lowered his sights to merely run for mayor of Marikina to replace his wife who in turn will seek a congressional post. After all his hometown needs his engineering genius now, more than ever, to rectify his bad judgment in killing the flood-warning system.

I am sure his neighbors have already forgiven him and will again elect him as their Hizzoner for considering his record -- he has done a lot more good than bad, and has been singularly credited to making Marikina a model city.

We hope to see him very busy after the 2010 elections, revising residential building codes, dredging the Marikina River, clearing its riverbanks from squatters to give way to completing 14-foot flood-control structures on each side.

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It is both sad and ironical, however, that for the tens of billions that have been lost in systematic plunder under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the Metro Manila chairman could only nickel and dime the Effective Flood Control Operation System. # # #

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