Written by Ike Señeres
Thursday, 10 March 2011 11:26 -

BANTAY GOBYERNO (Series 057)

By Ike Señeres

As the political situation in the Middle East worsens, two important questions are now being asked in connection with the rescue of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who are caught in the turmoil there. How do we know who they are and where they are? How are we going to communicate with them assuming that we will know who they are and where they are?

Even if these are basically political questions, I could see the technical aspects instead, leading me to conclude that these two questions are basically related to database and communications issues. Simply put, we would know who the OFWs are and where they are, if we had databases that would record their identities and whereabouts. We would also know how to communicate with them under normal conditions, but the equation changes when crisis situations would occur.

Any time now, the plain old telephone systems (POTS) and the cellular phone systems there could go down, possibly even their Internet connections. With these three systems knocked out, how could we continue to communicate with them? With all terrestrial systems out of commission, the only other technology that could be used internationally is satellite radio, and this is sure to work. I hope that our rescue team going to the Middle East would make use of this technology.

Of course, single side band (SSB) radio could still be used locally. When I was the head of telecommunications and management information systems (MIS) for the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), we were still able to communicate during the Gulf War when the POTS and the Internet went down there, simply by using SSB relay from post to post. This could still be used today, but our diplomats and consuls will not be able to communicate to the home office from the field where our OFWs are.

It was during my DFA days when I had an actual experience in making databases and communications systems work together, in tandem with each other. Included in that stint was my being head of the APEC Communications and Database System (ACDS), during the 1996 APEC Summit here in the Philippines. The system was later lauded by the APEC Leaders Forum for its excellence in data security and versatile communicability.

The success of ACDS was attributed to the fact that the computerized databases and the communications systems were planned and implemented as one combined design from the start. In other words, the addition of the communications system was not an afterthought that was added later. This has a lot to do with being compatible and seamless with each other, aside from the added advantage of being designed to be uniformly secure as joint system.

D uring the last election, it was evident that the computerized databases (whatever they had at that time) and the communications systems of the COMELEC were apart from each other, and were in fact bid out separately. Even if this appears to be the case, the situation is not hopeless, because many improvements could still be done in order to make these two components work well with each other. Of course, the underlying goal here is to secure the data as these are stored, and as these are transmitted, two parts of the same system that should work seamlessly.

As it is now, it would appear that the DFA had to wait for crisis situations to emerge in the Middle East
, before they could realize that they have no data to help them track down the endangered OFWs, and that they have no critical means of communicating with them. Having learned this lesson, the entire government should now review their systems to anticipate database and communications related problems in the future, and that includes the COMELEC.

As a side note, it would also appear that neither the Bureau of Immigration (BI) nor the Department of Tourism (DOT) has a dependable system of tracking the data related to the departures and the eventual destinations of all migrant Filipinos, not just the OFWs. If this not true, then the DFA would not have any problem now in knowing where the OFWs in the Middle East would be, and how they could be contacted.

I find it unusual that some members of the mass media are justifying the fact that it is impossible for the DFA to track down the OFWs in the troubled spots, because there are too many of them. To me, this is just a computing challenge, because that is what computers are supposed to do,

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to keep records of large numbers of data sets, no matter how many entries are involved. I could not imagine disfranchising some voters, just because the number of citizens is just too many to handle. # # #

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