

# Philippines: What Does 2014 Mean for Yolanda/Haiyan Survivors?

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It is almost two months (Nov 8 – Jan 8) since the Super typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) has created serious destruction and devastation on the central part of the Philippines and yet the victims' woes have shown no sign of abating. The year 2014 literally started with heavy rains which triggered heavy mudslides which pushed tons of debris and caused the blocking of the major roads and highways in Tacloban City as if testing the resiliency of the communities trying to pick up the pieces and rebuilding their lives from the havoc wrought by the climate change monster.

The rains were in fact the sign that rainy season in the country has started and will last up to the months of May or June (dry season) but with the realities brought about by our warmed world, nobody actually knows when will the wet and dry seasons in the country begin and end.

Everybody made positive sighs when the year 2013 ended with the 25<sup>th</sup> not so strong typhoon had visited the country and the 26<sup>th</sup> expected one did not materialize.

However, with the advent of the rainy/wet season, everybody is becoming anxious because the early recovery phase of rebuilding and reconstructing of their lives and their hopes has barely started.

In fact, almost two months since the super typhoon struck the regions, tons of debris have yet to be collected and properly disposed with, prompting the Secretary of Health to issue warning of possible health epidemic on people living in the vicinities. The Administrator of the City of Tacloban has tried to explain the non-action or slow action on the debris disposal on the lack of dump trucks claiming that only 17 vehicles are available in the city. The National government should not have waited for the exposure of these basic ugly realities of debris removal and cleaning up of the city and its surrounding. With the mudslides and the tons of debris, it is literally another disaster in waiting, putting the lives of the Yolanda survivors in danger once again.

Another reality that shows a symbol of monumental defeat is the non-disposal and salvaging of the ships washed inland during the devastation and havoc wrought by the super typhoon Yolanda. They remained living testimonies for the survivors of the ugliest and violent nature of the climate change monster last November 8, 2013. The continued presence of 15 commercial vessels (10 in Tacloban and 5 in Guiuan) and 2 government vessels in the middle of the devastated communities have made rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts of the victims very difficult. The ships sit atop unstable ground composed of debris and can fall to the people in the communities anytime. This is a virtual disaster in flesh.

The criminally slow manner of government to make action of removing these ships that stay literally untouched after almost two months go beyond our capacity to comprehend. The people in the

communities where the ships sit atop their neighbourhood will not only be always reminded of the painful devastation and the loss of lives of their loved ones but anytime they can be again victims of worst destruction – that is government neglect.

Another grave phenomenon is that up to this writing the dead and still thousands of them have yet to be buried in the urban centers like in Tacloban City. In fact, authorities from local and national government have set deadline to bury all the dead next week. The justification of the local and the national government of the non-burial of thousands of dead two months after the disaster had occurred is the DNA markings for identification of the cadavers. Yet the livings have to endure the stench and the offensive smell from the dead while trying to eke out a living and to survive. Not a few of them have still the courage left to ask why are the dead still have to endure longer and do not have decent burial after two months.

It has been said, especially in the mainstream media that disasters like Yolanda are great social equalizers because they hit all people regardless of their economic standing or political affiliation but the class footprints have been seen on the depth of the disaster impact and the capacity to cope up after the disasters. The dead relatives of the poor people will always be part of numerical listings openly reported as unidentified and missing persons. The rich will always have resources to locate their dead relatives and ensure that they would have proper identification and burial. The great divide between the rich and the poor can be clearly seen in the re-coping process and recovery stages of rehabilitation.

Hence, it will always be from the ranks of the poor that the unburied corpses belong and it is the poor who have been dependent of food packages and psychological first aids, which various agencies (international and local) have brought in. The climate change disasters like Yolanda have brought out glaring reality of inequalities and discriminations between the rich and the poor. It depicts the phenomenon that the poor majority are both politically and economically alienated and marginalized in pre-disaster stage and sharpens this reality in the actual and post disasters periods. Indeed, an effective orientation mechanism to face the realities brought about by climate change is to have system change. In this framework, the poor majority will be building and determining their lives and future. The development paradigm will always be sustainable and ecologically grounded which will both answer the needs of the present generation and lay the foundation that will secure the needs of the next generations. The productive activities will be community-based and people-centered and the profit consideration will always be secondary from the needs of its population. It requires emancipatory advancement where the tenants for instance, will win over the ownership of the land they till and achieve higher development in the empowerment process in the achievement of substantial change in the balance of power in different levels in society.

Meanwhile, there is an urgent need to strengthen the ranks of the poor. Organizational development and consciousness-raising will be done in the most advance section of the ranks of the poor. The raising of consciousness of the poor should be done not only theoretically but also most importantly in the actual productive endeavors in both the economic and political empowerment in their respective communities. Concretely, these activities will be done in different phases of rebuilding and reconstruction of their lives, shelters and restarting their sustainable livelihood. It should only be understood in this context that climate disasters like Yolanda could be a great equalizer. The poor majority has confronted the different stages of the disasters by strengthening themselves and substantially change the system that in the first place made the climate disasters possible and in the process empower themselves for the destructive effects of the warmed world. The equalizing process here is the substantial change in the power structure where the poor is getting the upper hand in determining their economic and political lives and future in the pre, actual and post disaster situation of their communities.

## **ENDING THE YEAR, BADLY and STARTING THE YEAR WRONGLY PREPARED**

Before the year 2013 ended, clear signs had shown that the government could not fulfil its promises to the Yolanda victims and survivors.

The government fall short of its commitment to build 228 bunkhouses (BH) and turn them over to the identified occupants/beneficiaries before Christmas of 2013. Only 122 were put up but only two bunkhouses were turned over by no less than by the President on December 22. The rest of the 122 bunkhouses have no running water and the occupants/beneficiaries are not yet identified. The amenities of each bunkhouse are: four toilets, 2 bathrooms and a common kitchen. All the rest of the 228 promised bunkhouses are either in the skeletal form or still in its gaseous stage. The said bunkhouses are supposed to accommodate 24 families each which means that if indeed it will come to reality, it can only accommodate 5472 families or 32,832 individuals out of more than 4 million families directly affected in the whole of Eastern, Central and Western Visayas. A Php14.6 billion supplemental budget was approved by the President at the end of the year to fund relief and rehabilitation which include the construction of the bunkhouses. However, according to the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), Php 15 billion are needed to construct bunkhouses for the victims of Yolanda alone. In addition, the bunkhouses according to the President are only temporary houses for the victims and survivors. In this case, it will be more prudent to look for permanent location and build the permanent houses for the survivors. This in fact, can hasten the faster phase of the normalization process of the survivors. After all, it is taking the government a very long time to find location and to build those temporary shelters. Unless temporary houses here means ten years occupancy.

However, the worst of it all is the emergence of the ugly picture that these bunkhouses (BH) are built overpriced and sub-standardized quality according to the report of an international shelter group assisting the government in its relief efforts. The BH being built by DPWH thru the private contractors in many projects do not comply with internationally recognized standard and best practices.

According to DPWH specification, the cost of building one bunkhouse is Php954,360.00 but because the contractor did not follow the specification, they spent only Php232,341.00, which is practically 20% of the price tag thus saving almost 70-80% for their pockets. It had been known to the devastated areas of Yolanda that the members of the President's Party (Liberal Party) have the influence to endorse to the DPWH their favoured contractors. The contractors have to overprice and use sub-standard materials to get more profits so that they (contractors) can give politicians their shares. This is another form of corruption similar if not worst to the pork barrel scandals. It is simply victimizing the helpless victims many times over.

These activities of corruption have been reported to the rehabilitation and reconstruction czar - former Senator "Ping" Lacson but as of this writing, no action yet has been taken.

Disclosures of these glaring irregularities come amidst a request by United Nation (UN) thru the Secretary General himself who visited the devastated areas for a \$791 million assistance for the government's rehabilitation and recovery plan of wrecked regions.

Another promise turned badly was the one made by Secretary Jericho Petilla of the Department of Energy - who is from Samar himself. He announced to the country that he would make sure, that 100% of electricity of the affected islands of Eastern Visayas would be back before Christmas and if this would not be realized he would resign his cabinet position. He did his best but it was not good enough because by Christmas day, two more municipalities would celebrate the holiday in the dark. He did tender his resignation but the President (as expected) did not accept such resignation.

In the last few days of 2013, the national budget of Php2.265 trillion for 2014 was approved. In this budget, Php113 billion was earmarked for relief and rehabilitation and reconstruction of affected communities. It is further broken down into the following; Php12 billion for calamity fund – an increase of almost 100% from Php7.5 billion last year; Php20 billion for relief and reconstruction and Php80 billion for reconstruction but belong to the category of un-programmed fund.

In the 2014 budget, one can easily notice that no budget is allotted for disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction. The government is thinking only of rehabilitation and reconstruction and a little on relief but nothing on how to prevent or mitigate the disastrous impact of the climate change monsters like Yolanda. It is a clear manifestation that the government of President “Noynoy” Aquino will not make a move to substantially change the system that made disasters like Yolanda to happen in any part of the country. There will be no total logging ban and open pit mining ban. The extractive type of industry which are owned and controlled by the big capitalists in the country will be here to stay and will have comfortable protection from the Aquino government.

In the middle of December 2013, President “Noynoy” Aquino announced the \$130billions needed amount for the rehabilitation and reconstruction in the aftermath of Yolanda fury and devastation. He made the statement during the launching of Reconstruction Assistance for Yolanda (RAY) in the presence of international donors. The National Economic Development Administration or NEDA, which is headed by the President, has also announced in the last part of December 2013 that the government needs Php360.8 billion to fund the post Yolanda reconstruction and rehabilitation master plan. This amount is equivalent to more than \$8.1 billion (Php44 to a dollar). There is a big difference between the first amount (\$130 billion) and the \$8.1 billion made by NEDA. Anyway, both figures are so big that definitely, it cannot come from the 2014 National budget nor it will be coming from the international donations. To source out for these needed funds, the government has limited options; it can borrow from multilateral financial institutions or collect more taxes from its people already made impoverished by the increases of prices of basic commodities. It can be all of the above since the needed amount is so big.

The first source (multilateral financial institutions) can offer minimum interest rate but still the same it will be the people who will shoulder the payment of the principal and the interests. The second source, which is collecting more taxes from the people, will surely be met by protests because the people cannot take additional burden anymore.

On the other hand, the government is announcing the economic growth of the country for 2013. It will be 4.1% to 5.9% growth of Gross Domestic Product in the last quarter of 2013. The average GDP growth of the 1<sup>st</sup> 3 quarters of the same year was 7.4%, that means the GDP of the country will be around 7%, not a bad performance in Asia only that it is not inclusive. It is a jobless growth and substantial parts of its people are wallowing in abject poverty. The aftermath of Yolanda will provide even a bleaker picture.

## **RAISING AND DASHING EXPECTATIONS**

With the billions of pesos pouring in for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Yolanda survivors and infrastructure, there will always be an understanding that the sheer amount alone can be not only driving hope but also fuelling optimism in the country. The infusion of such amount of money into the country's economy can surely support economic activities.

The country and its people which has withstood the ferocious winds and the giant tsunami like waves that flatten large parts of Eastern Visayas and killed more than 10 thousand people, have shown the world that it could transcend from these catastrophes and move on with strength that it

has gained along the way. The aids and solidarities coming from different countries and peoples have helped tremendously in gaining grounds for rehabilitation and reconstruction. In fact, such devastations and destructions can be turned into positive development in attaining substantial change in the power structure in the country in general and the affected areas in particular.

One of the most important and clear picture that emerged after the havoc wrought by Yolanda to Eastern Visayas is the abject poverty of almost 50% of its population and the deepness of the economic exploitation and political alienation of the poor majority by the few elites in the region. The glaring connections of the traditional politicians from Manila to the impoverished region like Samar and Leyte have clearly been manifested.

Not a few of the poor majority of people who have survived the ferocious devastation of Yolanda have experienced, for the first time, three regular meals a day after Yolanda. Before Yolanda, they could hardly have these types of "luxury". In fact, during the relief missions, some of the international NGOs have noticed that it is not just those directly injured by the typhoon, who are receiving the benefits of the aid but many are those who have not been injured but needed basic needs and services. International and domestic volunteers have to meet the survivors' immediate needs such as food, medicine and shelters at the same time addressing their long-term issues and problems (pre disaster situation).

The building of bunkhouses and the scandalous anomaly, which has been exposed by representatives of international NGOs, revealed the political reality of the alienation of the poor majority in terms of decision making especially when matters directly affecting them are at stake. The structural set of BH and the safety and protection of the survivors/families are put at stake because those behind the concept of construction of the BH did not realize the need to consult the potential occupants. This has been raised by Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) based on its concerns ranging from cramped spaces to lack of ventilation, risk of fires and safety and security of occupants, lack of privacy in rooms separated by thin plywood walls and sexual molestation of children while their parents are away trying to eke out for a living. The CCCM has strongly suggested that consultation with the potential occupants should be in place. Moreover, one can say that justice will be served if the millions of displaced families now are given the right to have a bigger voice in rebuilding and reconstruction of their lives and their future.

Every day the government's framework in rebuilding and reconstructing is becoming crystal clear - this is to work out for the development of the pre Yolanda situation. It will be going back to elite rule and governance and the majority of the people in the areas will go back to their old and passive role in the affairs of the region. However, disasters like Yolanda have rocked such political and economic arrangement. The poor majority has awakened from their deep slumber to reclaim their rightful place in society. The climate change monster has also exposed the strategic error of the political left claiming to serve the people. Solution or steps towards solution to the climate change cannot wait anymore for the protracted struggle to reach its strategic stalemate and the strategic offensive before effecting substantial change in the power balance between the poor majority and the few elite. There will be no raising and dashing of expectations of people to move beyond the material and psychological destruction if they get hold of their active role as the main stakeholders in building their lives and charting their future. Raising and dashing expectations can only happen if people themselves delegate their well-beings to others.

The year 2014 can usher in encouraging possibilities in the lives of the poor majority who have become victims of the warmed world monster like Yolanda. By refusing to be treated as victims with less rights and privileges can be a step to right direction. Climate change survivors can be great resources for all the phases of disasters. In fact, it is only their active involvement in the rehabilitation and reconstruction stages of recovery that can surely make all the humanitarian

efforts succeed.

**Richard S. Solis**, January 6, 2014

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