



**Perry Diaz**

# *PerryScope*

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## *Typhoon Ondoy : A Tragic Disaster*

**SACRAMENTO, CALIF., Oct 7(PinoyGlobal)** - Last September 26, 2009, Typhoon Ondoy -- internationally known as Ketsana -- hit Metro Manila. It was the worst typhoon since 1967. After two days of torrential rain and delugial floods, the government reported that Typhoon Ondoy left 288 people dead, five injured and 42 missing. Damage to property was estimated at P8.328 billion, including P2.743 billion in infrastructure and P5.584 billion in agriculture. It also said that "at least 797,404 families or 3,899,307 people in the entire Luzon, Cordillera, Western Visayas, Regions 9 and 12, Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and Metro Manila were affected."

Could the massive floodings have been mitigated?

While it is hard to control flooding, it can be argued that it could be mitigated by effective flood control planning and timely emergency response by government agencies. In a recent article, "Not an act of God but a sin . . .," written by Alcuin Papa of Philippine Daily Inquirer, urban planner Felino "Jun" Palafox was quoted as saying, "The flood disaster that struck Metro Manila over the weekend was not an act of God but a sin of omission by government and private real estate developers."

Palafox said that "a land use plan that took floods into consideration was drawn up as far back as 1977, titled 'Metro Manila Transport, Land Use and Development Planning Project,' sponsored by the World Bank." He also said, "the study had already noted the possibility of heavy flooding in at least three sites of urban growth in the Philippine

capital—the Marikina Valley and its northern and southern parts." "When I saw the damage caused by the floods recently, I realized that these were the same areas that had already been identified," Palafox observed.

The question is: "What did the government do to mitigate flooding and other problems identified by the 1977 study?" Palafox said, "Nothing."

In the aftermath of Ondoy, I received from a friend a forwarded email from an unidentified author -- most probably a government engineer who didn't want to be identified for fear of reprisal -- about his analysis of the disastrous flooding. He wrote:

"It's deemed impossible for the supposedly excessive amount of rainfall, equivalent to a month's outpour condensed in 6 hours time, to be the main culprit." His rationale was: (1) The rain was not that strong; (2) We've had worst rains before; (3) And why Marikina, Pasig and Cainta became water worlds in just an hour; and (4) Why Moriones, Tondo, just several hundred meters away from Manila Bay was barely affected if nature did cause the rivers to swell, overflow and contribute greatly to the deluge.

He further said, "The Manggahan Floodway was especially built to control flooding mostly in Marikina, Pasig and Cainta areas. Mechanical or systems failure of the water pumping station due to negligence was the more logical reason for the flash flood that swamped even high end villages."

Recently, Sen. Aquilino Pimentel Jr. indicated that he wants to file a class action suit against those responsible for the allegedly “reckless release of water from dams” near Metro Manila. He believes that it contributed to the rapid rise of floodwater during the storm. At the moment, he is studying the facts and collecting evidence to determine who were responsible for allowing the water to flow out of the dams; thus, flooding the Marikina Valley.

By all indications, the massive floodings could have been mitigated, if not controlled. Poor government urban planning contributed to the massive floodings. You add the negligence and ineptitude of government officials and you have a disaster that not even Noah could have handled.

Could lives have been saved?

A lot of people complained that the national government, through its National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), did not respond to the disaster in a timely manner. Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro as NDCC chairman was faulted for the NDCC’s lack of preparedness and failure to save people’s lives.

As the country’s centralized and primary disaster planning center, NDCC lacks the logistics, manpower, and an effective disaster emergency plan to cope with the massive displacement of people, many of whom had to stay on rooftops to stay alive. From what I heard, NDCC had only three rubber boats to use in evacuating the 3.9 million flood victims.

And to make the situation worse, the government didn’t have the funds for disaster assistance. A news account says that a recent Commission on Audit (COA) report said that President Arroyo “has all but spent the P800 million contingency fund allotted to the Office of the President.” Accordingly, the COA said that “nearly every peso of the fund had been used for her foreign junkets, on top of the more than P1 billion budget for her official travels.”

It’s not surprising then that on September 28, Sen. Miriam Defensor Santiago filled two legislative bills -- totaling P10 billion -- to “fund relief operations, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of areas devastated by Typhoon Ondoy.” How about the senators and congressmen’s pork barrel funds? There are more than 100 senators and congressmen representing the 25 provinces in and around Metro Manila. Or did they already spend their pork barrel funds somewhere else?

Sen. Defensor Santiago also said that mayors of areas gravely affected by Typhoon Ondoy -- including Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno -- should be suspended for negligently performing their duties.

Command responsibility

The Typhoon Ondoy disaster and tragedy once again manifested the government’s inefficiency in dealing with emergency situations. Although Teodoro and Puno are to be held accountable for not doing their jobs, President Arroyo should -- nay, must! -- accept full command responsibility for the Typhoon Ondoy fiasco, a disaster that could have been mitigated and a human tragedy that could have been avoided.