
Views from the Communities'

Short note on the Taal eruption, Philippines

On January 26, two weeks, since the first day of Taal volcano eruption, the Philippine authorities lowered the alert level from 4 to 3. This signified the possibility of return of many of the 376,000 displaced villagers, at their own option and pace. Since then, most displaced families from affected municipalities have returned to their homes, except those from Agoncillo and Laurel, the two most devastated municipalities, which are within the permanent danger zone. A week later on February 3, Phivolcs recorded a volcanic earthquake with magnitude 3.2, which shows magma is still moving beneath that could lead to eruptive activity in the Taal Volcano's crater. The volcano saga is not over yet, which means the evacuation could resume anytime.

Amid turmoil resulting from the eruption was the daily blow-by-blow updates on social media. Questions surfaced, which included: what happened with the early warning, as people were still touring the island during the day of eruption? Who were responsible? Why were there many people caught in the volcano island and the neighboring municipalities during the eruptive stage on January 12? Why was there no systematic rescue and feeding of the poor animals trapped in the island? Why was there no enforcement of the directives on the 14 km radius permanent danger zone.

People have different perspectives on the above. The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) alerted the concerned local government units (LGUs) as to the impending danger, raising the alert to level 1 as early as March 28, 2019, signaling the possibility of eruption. The people residing in the volcanic island live there as it was the source of their livelihood through hosting tourists and, selling native handicrafts and food, they earn their living from the touristic scenery of a picturesque volcano sitting in the middle of a beautiful lake. The concerned LGUs have placed warning signs and did some disaster preparedness activities including public awareness. In general people were aware and know what to do, but still there was a serious state of complacency for those concerned agencies and the general public including tourists, who were not aware of the alert level 1, indicating the possibility of eruption.

Despite some apprehensions about the eruption that caused an emergency situation at the beginning of this year in the country, there were no known deaths resulting directly from the volcanic activity.

A total of 98,187 families of 376,327 persons from Batangas and Cavite Provinces were affected. Evacuation happened in different forms, but somehow organized. About 37,000 families mostly those with no relatives to go to, sought refuge in evacuation centers, where their LGUs led them. Some 44,000 families went to their relatives in the neighboring towns who willingly hosted them as long as necessary. The LGUs in the cities and municipalities within the Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon (CALBARZON) provinces and cities in Metro Manila hosted the affected families. Food and nonfood supplies came daily, there was no scarcity on those items, though at the beginning there was a demand for more blankets, pillows, mattresses and mats. Food, as far as caloric intake of the evacuees was not a major issue, though nutritional intake was in general not sufficient at the beginning.



The last eruptions that could be recalled were in 1977, but the major one was in 1965. I was then in the second year of secondary school. There were no major casualties in those eruptions as far as human lives were concerned. Livelihoods of those living in the danger zone were highly disturbed, mostly those who were directly affected were farmers, fisherfolks and small entrepreneurs thriving on the touristic activities. I had no clue then that my later career would focus on advocacy and practice on disaster risk reduction and management

I was in Calaca, a nearby affected municipality during the recent eruption. While going home we saw the white cloud enveloping the surrounding sky, could smell the sulfur and could hear thunderous explosions from afar. Along the way from Calaca to Batangas City, passing through Lemery and partly through Taal. People were on the street with their cell phones capturing the beautiful clouds. There was no running or panicking. I could sense there was a certain amusement. It was not until much later when the alert level was raised to level 3, then to level 4, that people began to feel the urgency of the matter as by then they were already experiencing the eruption. Once we got home, we watched the eruption from our balcony. It was like watching fireworks at New Year.

Volcano island has been declared a permanent danger zone, supposed not to be inhabited, but there were people living in the island. Many animals including 3,000 horses used to carry people to tour the beautiful scenic Taal, were trapped as there was no advisory from the local authorities.

What could have been should have been. Since tourism was allowed by the local authorities in the volcano island, the safety of families living there and their animals, tourists and guides should have been a priority in the local's disaster risk reduction and management plan and implementation. Though no one died during the chaos, the nervousness and worries that accompanies the crisis was tremendous, according to the locals from Buli, Taal who evacuated to our village.

While in evacuation, families worried no end about their cows, pigs, goats, chicken and dogs. Some men needed to go back during the allotted time by the authorities to feed their animals. However, when the opportunity of going back ceased due to volcanic threat, the animals went hungry and some died or got lost. Quick decision to sell those animals to the neighboring towns could have been done. There were many people willing to buy those animals even to help. Or if not sold, caretaker-families outside of the danger zones could have been organized. Animal safety was a priority for the owners as their source of earning a living. Or the affected LGUs could have bought the animals then sold them to people who were concerned about the plight of the affected population. It is an administrative decision and logistical arrangement that could have been immediately put in place.

One positive thing that happened was the *hosting of local people*. More people went to relatives and friends rather than to evacuation centers. The host communities did everything to make life bearable and comfortable for the guest-evacuees. Hospitality and kindness became the norm during those two weeks of refuge. Donations from the host and neighboring communities came daily. In our village, the evacuees told me on their second day of stay that they will not go hungry for the next several days due to the donation of rice, noodles, canned goods, etc. What they needed was blankets, pillows and mats. Not long after, their wish was granted by people from Batangas City and from the locals.

Bonding between evacuees and the local people was built that will be remembered by everyone. At the Metro Batangas Adventist Elementary School in Banaba West, hosts from the community and more than 80 evacuees from Taal, Agoncilo and Cuenco had a gathering a day before the return of the evacuees. They had a good recollection of how well they were treated and how they appreciated their stay in the school. They promised to continue the lessons they learned on health, prayers and other psychosocial support aspects and that they would invite their hosts once they have settled back in their devastated communities. It was a tearful but a joyful goodbye. Same appreciation could be heard from the more than 600

evacuees camped in Banaba West elementary School, from the 52 individuals in a private land with homes in Talumpok East and from those who were housed in private homes in the many barangays in Batangas City.

Concern for fellow evacuees was manifested as well. When clothes were offered, they politely said that they have enough and requested the one donating to give to other evacuees as they may not have enough. A lady evacuee in an official evacuation center in Alfonso, Cavite said she was donating her canned goods to others outside the evacuation centers, as she had more than enough.

Once again, *community-based approaches* to disaster risk reduction and emergency management works. The cooperation amongst evacuees just prior, during and after their evacuation was noteworthy. Before the official rescue came, people already were helping themselves, coordinating and supporting the evacuation process. They pooled their resources together with their relatives from other parts of Batangas province, who provided vehicles, place of safety and food.

The *LGUs from other municipalities* and cities in Batangas province and the neighboring CALABARZON responded quickly and appropriately. The LGUs' chief executives also performed well amid confusion and chaos. They were on their toes in responding to the needs of their constituencies. The mayor of Batangas City declared the cancellation of the annual city fiesta, which was supposed to be held on January 16. It is looked forward to by the Batanguenos. The mayor, in her written directive announced the cancellation a day after the volcano eruption and requested government agencies and the people to reallocate their budget for the fiesta to helping the suffering evacuees. The people heeded, and even some churches and schools received donations of groceries intended for the menu to be prepared for the fiesta.

The nongovernment organizations also did their part by complementing those actions by the government and private citizens. An assessment of needs was immediately undertaken by the Center for Disaster Preparedness Foundation, Inc (CDP). Realizing that the requirements for relief goods, both food and nonfood were being met, the management decided to complement what was already there by addressing the anxiety building up amongst the evacuees. One of the areas, it served was those who were hosted by the Alfonso Central Elementary School. The CDP in partnership with the Cavite State University (CSU) and the Pasig Adventist Community Services (PACS) and in cooperation with the evacuees through their home room leaders organized a psychosocial support services for a day, in January 24, just several days before the evacuees were ordered to go back home. The participating home leaders conveyed their utmost gratitude by saying that the activities they had made them realized that despite what occurred to them, they were not alone and they were not desperate as there were many more compassionate people around. The combined efforts of the CDP, CSU and the PACS was very timely to prepare the evacuees with renewed hopes and readiness to face new challenges.

The emergency situation has died down, but the threat of eruption and volcanic earthquake stills looms. The more urgent thing to follow through is the recovery concerns. Where will those from the new permanent danger zone resettle? How to avail of the rehabilitation funds for the repair and reconstruction of houses and livelihoods is a nagging question for the survivors. The huge task of rebuilding for the Batanguenos is at hand.

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