

Women are Builders

Natural disasters do not choose their victims. They cause immeasurable suffering and senseless deaths. In Bangladesh, major river systems overflowed and swept away whole villages. In California, strong earth tremors made concrete structures crumble like children's building blocks. China, India, Pakistan, the Soviet Union, and many more countries have their own tales of terror and hardship to tell.

Media all over the world play up the material and human toll of each disaster much like keeping a scoreboard to measure how greater or less each disaster turns out to be. What has not been placed into focus is the human effort that is required to rebuild and rehabilitate long after each disaster.

In most cases, women play a vital role in this effort. They seek out potable water amidst great floods. They "keep house" even when they are homeless.

When the Philippine's Mount Pinatubo erupted last June 15th, the Isis workers decided to initiate a relief effort for the victims. After soliciting goods from family and friends, we set out to distribute the goods ourselves. This experience

evoked different feelings from each of us.

Some of the workers were direct victims, having home and family in the affected areas but we all went to Dinalupihan (a small town in Bataan) as relief workers. We started the day in high spirits. On the way, we were singing and exchanging funny stories, telling each other how long ago it was since each had travelled this far north. As we hit the highway, the singing stopped because sand would get into our mouths. The fine sand hurt our eyes, and we had to cover our faces with towels. That this trip was no picnic became more and more apparent. We were silent the rest of the way.

We did not specifically seek out the women, intending to distribute our relief goods to the most needy. Almost always, however, it was a woman around whom a community or a group of families would revolve.

In the following pages, the Isis workers share their personal accounts of what they saw and how they felt.



The destruction is unimaginable. More than 70% of the houses were destroyed. Vast agricultural lands for planting and livestock production on which the majority of the people rely for their living are buried under two to three feet of volcanic ashes and sand. Unless the lands are rehabilitated, the entire province shall have to rely on relief goods for its survival in the coming months or even years. The Aetas, an indigenous cultural group in the area, have lost the most. It is not only that they have lost their home of a "mountain" to go back to, it may also be that their entire culture will be wiped out.

La Rainne

We live a difficult and dangerous life. We are burdened by our economic, political, cultural and social problems. We even have to endure hardships brought by natural calamities. When I observed the situation of the women victims of the volcano eruption, I had to admire them for having the strength and determination to go on with their lives.

Men stopped working when the fields were buried in ash. But the women continue to nurse their babies, and keep house even when there is no roof.

Because I have seen these women, I know there is hope.

Mayang

U.S. media ignore human suffering caused by volcanic eruptions

by Irene Natividad



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I gazed up at thousands of bewildered evacuee's faces in Manila's Amoranto Stadium and felt absolutely helpless. Under the sweltering sun, families vied for space to sit or lie on concrete seats, many still dazed from the rigors of their flight from Mount Pinatubo's wrath. I realized for the first time the human scale of destruction that these violent eruptions had wreaked upon the lives of the men, women and children in this stadium and other evacuation centers. Deprived of homes and sources of living, Pinatubo's victims face a numbing future.

There is no potable water. Ashes, sand and mud disgorged from the volcano have polluted rivers, wells and water reservoirs as far away as Manila. There is no electricity in many areas around the volcano, so factories and businesses have been brought to a standstill. There are few trees left

Seeing families sleep on straw mats on the cold cement floor of the Amoranto Stadium Evacuation Center, mothers with children in their arms wait patiently for the next rationed meal, and some tired souls quarrel heatedly over a bar of laundry soap, was a painful experience for me.

Happy Valley in Bataan is now Sacrifice Valley. Once verdant rice fields are now barren deserts. Tall coconut trees still stand but their leaves point to the ground as if in defeat, humbled by the heavy ash. Fruit trees and plants are covered by ash. I was thinking to myself, How can they bear fruit again?

Arsie



standing and few homes with intact roofs because ash and sand, mixed with the monsoon season's constant rain, create a concrete-like substance that causes whole structures to collapse.

There are few farms left, buried under highly acidic ash deposits or sand from the volcano. The highly-productive prawn and fish farms are also gone, while mango and coconut groves are predicted to take two to four years before they can bear fruit again.

There is nothing benign or scenic about a volcanic eruption: 338 people have died and 200,000 have fled their homes. For many, a way of life is gone. The daily terror of ongoing eruptions with their accompanying "rain" of ash and sand, earthquake tremors (now numbering well over 100), the noxious fumes of sulfuric gases and the constant threat of mud flows, which can

The ground gleamed ash-white, it hurt to stare at it. All around us, broken tree branches. It was hard to believe that where we now trudged, vegetables used to grow, that the bare trees, shining white in the sun once bore the sweet mangoes that are reputed in this region.

Bel

Taking a trip to the northern countryside used to mean a relaxing drive to where the farther north you go, the cooler and fresher the air becomes. On this trip however, the air went from sticky-warm to prickly-dry. Sand grits get into your eyes, nose, ears, scalp, under your finger- and toenails. It was like taking a trip to hell.

I saw six Aeta families share a small nipa hut, their unfed dark brown-skinned children with their arms, feet and faces patched ash-white. How will these children grow up into healthy, normal adults?

Elvie

It was disgusting how local politicians use relief work for personal glorification. Relief work is also a very rich ground for graft and corruption. Like that of last year's disaster our disaster response is largely reactive. Experiences also show that even relief assistance is still largely dependent upon foreign aid. This is manifested by relief goods that do not really meet people's needs. Donated goods are fine for immediate relief but what is more important is to find long-term livelihood projects for the victims. More important to note is that some donor countries usually have political strings attached to what they donate.

Doms

The enraged volcano has erupted, and it has caused massive destruction. Let us not forget, however, that long before the volcano unleashed its wrath, our country has been submerged in foreign debt, and battling against the U.S. military bases which makes a mockery of our autonomy as a nation.

Belyn



The day the volcano erupted, my family and I huddled under a dining table. The earth shook every ten minutes. Night fell at eleven o'clock in the morning. There were no lights. The debris spewed by the volcano played a long winding staccato on our roof. My dad said we will evacuate as soon as the sun shows up. That was early in the afternoon. I was wondering if our roof was strong enough because around us, we could hear our neighbors' houses fall one by one. I fell asleep.

I was so glad to open my eyes the next day because I saw daylight! I had thought last night was the end of the world. My heart sank when I went outside. It was just like a scene in the nuclear holocaust movie "The Day After."

Em

erase a whole town, make planning a new life difficult.

The fear I felt as my hotel room rocked several times when Mount Pinatubo first erupted violently and blanketed Manila with ash is nowhere near the terror that plagued the evacuees closer to the volcano itself. The isolation and frustration I felt as closed airports in Manila and Hong Kong left me stranded are nowhere near the permanent personal and economic displacement of Mount Pinatubo's victims.

Now, safe at home in the United States for a scant week, I am amazed by the lack of mention here of human toll of this disaster. There has been wide coverage of the volcano's impact on U.S. bases, the evacuation of U.S. dependents and scientific assessments of the eruptions by experts. The New York Times' front-page piece June 30

on the volcano's positive effect on retarding global warming left me enraged. While I'm happy California will now get the rain it needs because of Pinatubo's ash clouds, I am appalled by the lack of reports on the plight of the Filipino farmer who must now confront a highly acidic soil on which rice - the staple of the Philippine diet - may never grow. Where is the Filipino face in this disaster?

The fact of the matter is that the largest volcanic eruption in the 20th century has caused massive economic and environmental damage to a people just beginning to recover from two prior natural disasters - last year's earthquake and massive typhoon.

How to deal with the potential of acid rain, the effect of sulfur-laden ashes on

people and animals and the deforestation of large tracts of land are just some of the environmental concerns now confronting Filipinos.

I am told that nature is resilient. And so are Filipinos. Already, plans are under way for massive cleanup efforts, for new relocation areas charted for the evacuees and for research into new crops and sources of livelihood - all these while ashfall, mud flows and tremors continue.

Volcanologists say that Mount Pinatubo could be in a continuous state of eruption for as long as three years. In the meantime, Americans - a people compassionate by nature - need to be aware of and respond to the ongoing human suffering inflicted by the volcano. Otherwise, how can we look the Filipino children in Amoranto Stadium in the face when they ask: "When do we go home?"