



Untold stories

CTALK By Cito Beltran (The Philippine Star) Updated December 28, 2011 12:00 AM

It rained like in any ordinary day of the rainy season. Then the lights went out. Then they noticed the water rising. Since there was a typhoon, it seemed normal. But the water rose abnormally fast, too fast!

“ It took only four minutes for the water to go from ankle deep to neck deep. Then we were floating.” Those who stayed indoor were the lucky ones. Most of them slowly worked their way up their homes; almost all who survived did so by breaking through their roofs and seeking higher ground. Some were not so lucky.

According to survivors, many of those who died tried to walk out of their homes in the dark, not realizing that the rushing flood around them was half water and half mud. Unable to withstand the pounding force of mud many fell and were carried away. Other victims had actually managed to cling on to trees, used ropes, some were even in concrete homes. But their momentary safety ended when hundreds of logs, trees and floating debris crushed them or slammed into them.

In addition to those trapped or crushed, I learned of several incidents where families sought higher ground by jumping into their cars or SUVs. Sadly, several families and their maids reportedly drowned when the cars were swamped or tumbled around in the surging waters.

In that oppressive darkness, the rain kept pouring. But what frightened many was a sound they never heard before. It was not pelting rain or rushing water. The sound was similar to grinding of rocks and stones, a low continuous sound of things being crushed. To add to their fear, they could hear familiar voices crying for help in the darkness. In their helplessness, some covered their ears.

Some survivors told me that the amount of mud that flowed down the river added about 2 feet high silt and soil where it piled up.

At the Xavier Maria Reyna University Hospital, we spoke with survivors who floated out to sea and ended up being rescued along Camiguin Island! They told us of how they floated clinging to logs, banana trees or pieces of wood. As they held on for dear life, they constantly encountered rats and snakes trying to ride on their backs while sharks would swim around looking for something to eat.

The worst account I heard were about fishermen who rescued live pigs or cattle first, then would come back to rescue survivors several hours later.

Yet there are also tales of devotion and heroism.

“Dolfo”, a 21-year-old man, was swept out to sea near Camiguin and as he struggled to survive he saved a young boy and kept him going until they were rescued. A woman survivor was rescued totally naked at sea by a combined AFP group. An Army enlisted man took his own shirt off and covered the victim, ignoring the cold winds.

The **Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres** tirelessly worked to care for our small community of 55 families with about 75 kids. They prepared meals, they did stress debriefing, gave relief goods. When the NAVY delivered coffins for Cagayan de Oro, **Sister Celeste and Sister Eden of SPC** gave the ceremonial prayers late at night. But no one knew that some of the Sisters who were working were cancer victims.

Neither will you see on TV or print the hundreds of DSWD workers that have been at the evacuation centers round the clock, Navy reservists, Army and Air Force personnel and trainees who unloaded goods and coffins from ships, trucks and planes. I saw them there alongside Army General Felix and Navy Vice Admiral Alex Pama, along with other officers of the Air Force providing services till late into the night.

Disasters just like death is an equalizer. I saw a German man whom everybody presumed was a tourist, but I learned that he too was a victim of Sendong when his own house was flooded up to the ceiling. The hotel where media people set up was half full of "well-off" refugees.

During breakfast I met fellow UP graduate Ding Alonto, the regional vice president of PhilHealth and his wife Michelle. I learned that they too got flooded and checked in at the hotel. I listened to the couple who impressed me as very well educated and bright individuals. I learned that Ding was out on official business during the flood so Michelle saved her son and daughter purely on survival instinct. At the height of it all the couple were not aware that their house that was under construction had saved so many families from sure death.

Traumatized by the experience Michelle who is an entrepreneur decided to find a safe and high place to rent. The search took her to a rental unit in the exclusive village called Pueblo de Oro. Accompanied by her mother, they secured the rental, signed papers etc.

The next morning, Michelle returned with her daughter Asia, dropped the young girl and told her to go the person in charge while mommy parked the car. As Michelle neared the entrance, her daughter rushed out in tears saying; "mommy, I'm sorry, I failed you. They say we can't live here. Why is it wrong to be a Muslim?"

Michelle has promised to bring Asia to Malaysia and raise her in a place where the government respects and protects peoples' rights and religious belief.

When I first arrived in Cagayan de Oro, my friend **Sister Eden Orolino** cautioned us to be careful not to become the second disaster, she also counseled us that the disaster should define us. How right she was, how some ignorant and biased elitists can easily fall from being a blessing and become a curse.