

The August 23, 2010 Hostage-taking Tragedy: Some Reflections

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This symposium on new directions in Philippines-China relations was planned several months ago to celebrate the 23rd anniversary of PACS (Philippine Association for Chinese Studies 菲律宾中华研究学会). The characters 中华 stands for 中国 (China) and 华人 (ethnic Chinese). The organization focuses on research and studies on China, Philippines-China relations, and the Chinese in the Philippines.

The hostage-taking tragedy on August 23, 2010 was not part of the earlier program. But since it is still such a hot topic and we realize that the Philippine government's handling of the crisis caused strains in Philippines-China relations, we decided to include a post-incident analysis and reflection. After all, one of the association's objectives is to be a venue for analysis and exchange of ideas, as well as policy recommendations, on matters affecting Philippines-China relations.

I will not go into details about what happened – why what needed to be done was not done and what should not be done was done. This reflection will focus more on the les-

sons that must be learned and the implications of the Manila hostage tragedy on Philippines-China relations.

One week after the hostage-taking tragedy, I was appointed as a member of the Incident Investigation Review Committee (IIRC). The five members of the IIRC were Secretary Leila de Lima (Department of Justice) as chairperson, Secretary Jesse Robredo (Department of Interior and Local Government) as vice-chairperson, and three civilian members: Atty. Roan Libarios (Integrated Bar of the Philippines), representing the legal sector, Herman Basbaño (Kapisanan ng mga Broadkaster ng Pilipinas), representing media, and myself (founding president of Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran), representing the Chinese-Filipino community.

The IIRC immediately started work on September 1 and submitted its report to the Office of the President on September 17. We finished the arduous task (under time constraints) of investigating, fact-finding, and reviewing the events and pinpointing the disastrous acts of omission and commission, as well as the people responsible for them. It was a great responsibility placed upon the five-member committee not just by the victims, their families, and the governments of China and the Hong Kong, but our own people too demanded the truth.

My reflection on the hostage-taking tragedy can be succinctly summed up as: A criminal justice system that failed plus a crisis management committee that did not manage plus an inefficient, ill-trained and ill-equipped police force plus a media institution that wants all the freedom without the responsibility equals the perfect formula for a disaster – a disaster for which eight Hong Kong tourists paid with their lives.

Backlash

The hostage incident itself was mishandled but the aftermath or post-incident handling could have been

better. Obvious to many people were the clash of cultures, a different sensitivity and sensibility, a different paradigm in looking at things.

The Chinese have long memories. They do not easily forget injustices done to them. Public statements of their government officials are couched diplomatically. What matters more is what is said behind closed government doors and among the citizenry.

Although the Chinese Embassy in Manila assured the Philippine government that China considers the event an isolated case, and that China will not allow it to affect its relations to the Philippines, those on the grounds, however, took strong stands.

Example, there was no official travel ban from China to the Philippines, but in Beijing, advertisements of package or group tours to the Philippines were politely rejected. Fortunately, Shanghai did not do this. Still, the one-week long national day break (October 1-7, 2010) saw considerably fewer tour groups from China. Up to the end of 2010, there was virtually zero in-bound tourists from Hong Kong.

Those who came were mostly conference and convention participants who were booked several months before the incident happened. We, at the Bahay Tsinoy – Museum of the Chinese in Philippine Life, know this firsthand because the museum is always a must visit for Hong Kong and China tourists. Unfortunately, Bahay Tsinoy suffered from the vastly lessened number of visitors. (In fact, the Chinese new year break in February 2011 would likewise show considerably fewer Chinese arrivals – post symposium note).

Hong Kong's Phoenix Television's survey of 100,000 Chinese conducted two days after the incident revealed that 60 percent said they will not visit the Philippines, ever. It is understandable that at that time, the wounds were quite fresh but it should serve as a wake-up call that the backlash of the

hostage-fiasco is wide, far-reaching, and unprecedented.

A case in point: Hong Kong icon Jacky Chan was viciously criticized when he asked for sobriety and spoke on behalf of the Philippines.

Blogs and social networks in China, Hong Kong, Canada, and other parts of the globe with Chinese-speaking communities immediately lambasted the hostage fiasco. Some called for people to stop buying Philippine products, hiring Philippine maids and traveling to the country.

Many Philippine government websites were hacked. The virulence took a life of its own. Later comments shifted from the inept police bungling to the government's poor handling of the crisis and the perceived "callousness, indifference, insensitivity, and cold-heartedness" of officials who do not give importance to the tragedy.

A Clash of Cultures

The fence-mending badly needed after the tragedy was stymied by the series of public relations nightmares that followed: a flag draped over the coffin of the suspect, former policeman Rolando Mendoza, and taking of souvenir photos of smiling faces not just of students but police investigators at the crime scene. Both showed extreme lack of *delicadeza* that fed the outrage.

This was worsened when viewers interpreted President Benigno S. Aquino III's smirk as a smile when he was confronted with clear signs of bungling when he inspected the hostaged bus. This, the Chinese thought, was indifference and callousness of the government, which worsened what was already a very bad situation.

What the Chinese don't realize is that Filipinos smile even if they themselves are in the midst of misery and tragedy. They should have seen footages of those stranded, homeless victims of Typhoon Ondoy and countless illegal settlers being ejected, waving and smiling in front of TV cameras.

Filipinos are bombarded daily with images of massacres, whole scale ambush, kidnapping, bombings, buses falling off the ravine. In short, Filipinos have been injured by so much misery and have lived through so much tragedy that for many, the hostage-taking was just another sad event, all in a day's happening.

Unfortunately, the victims were foreigners and Chinese at that. We should have been more sensitive and considerate of how the victims will feel and the government should have taken that into consideration.

Three days after the hostage tragedy, at the Manila Pavillon where the Hong Kong victims' and their families stayed, I sat with the Chinese and Hong Kong officials to help work out with Philippine representatives the logistics of sending the deceased, the survivors, and other unharmed hostages back to Hong Kong.

Many, including the media, asked me some tough questions like: "This is the third day after the incident, why has no one from government resigned – no one was responsible? If the incident happened in China and ended tragically, the minister of Foreign Affairs, the chief of the National Police and the city mayor would have immediately resigned."

The Chinese Embassy officials, being diplomats after all, explained that that is not how things are normally done in the Philippines. However, I recalled Foreign Affairs Secretary Roberto Romulo and Labor Secretary Nieves Confesor, who both took responsibility and resigned over the execution of Filipina domestic helper Flor Contemplacion in Singapore.

In this hostage incident, up to today (two months after the tragedy), nobody has taken responsibility. The police say they are not at fault, the mayor and the crisis management committee say they are not at fault, the Ombudsman and her deputy say they are not at fault, and the media say they are not at fault. So, the hostages offered themselves to be shot by hostage-taker Rolando Mendoza in Luneta?

Tough Questions

1. *Why did our President not humble himself and go with the Chinese Ambassador (Liu Jianchao) to visit the survivors at the hospital?*

In doing so, he may have to face the survivors' angry tirade and invectives, but he is the nation's leader and he was with the Chinese Ambassador. Doing so would have been a great opportunity to show that he cared.

2. *Why didn't police shoot hostage-taker Mendoza when there were several opportunities for a clear shot very early in the day?*

This again showed the different perspectives that the Chinese and the Filipinos come from. The Chinese see no excuse for not shooting Mendoza right away. He committed a crime in taking a bus full of foreign tourists and he was heavily armed. To them, immediately, he was considered a dangerous criminal and should have been shot down when opportunity provided.

To the Filipinos, however, so used to hostage-taking dramas that eventually ended well, a successful negotiation is one where all the hostages and the hostage-taker are unharmed. The police explained that had they shot Mendoza right away, while negotiations were ongoing and he was still releasing hostages, they would certainly be charged with murder and violation of human rights.

3. *Will the incident have adverse impact on the Chinese-Filipino community?*

My response to this question was a definite NO. I explained that the Chinese in the Philippines, compared to other Southeast Asian countries, enjoy the best position and situation because we have treated our fellow Pinoys as brothers and vice versa.

We stand with fellow Filipinos in condemning the bungling of the hostage situation, we were as bewildered, angered and shamed by what happened. The Filipinos are a very tolerant and understanding people and they will not take the anger of the Hong Kong people against the Tsinoys just as we Tsinoys hope the Hong Kong people will not judge the entire Philippines by one isolated incident.

4. The most difficult question was: What if the hostages were Americans, would the Philippine government have treated them the same way?

The Chinese hostages are our guests and we should have taken better care of them. But, if the hostages were indeed Americans, it is not farfetched to conclude that interference from the American Embassy will not just be allowed but may even be welcome.

What happened was the Chinese Embassy learned about the hostage crisis from the media. They were at the command post at the Rizal Park but as expected of them, they could not interfere (and will not be allowed to interfere) with what was then a police matter. Our Philippine officials did not inform neither the Chinese Embassy nor the Hong Kong officials about their nationals being in the midst of a potentially dangerous situation.

Fence-mending

All these recriminations, accusations, and explanations are water under the bridge. Much fence-mending must be done so that we could move on. The Philippines is fortunate that we have a consummate diplomat, Ambassador Liu Jianchao, with us. He has tried his best to ease the strained relations.

On the Philippines part, the Filipino professionals, businessmen and domestic helpers in Hong Kong were a big help in acting as bridges between the Philippines and Hong Kong.

Employers who are quite dependent on the hardworking and skilled Filipinos asked their own compatriots not to judge the Philippines by one unfortunate incident. Some of them spoke on our behalf.

The academic community, including the officers and members of the ISSCO, International Society for the Study of Chinese Overseas (PACS international counterpart), wrote commentaries for newspapers and went on television on our behalf.

Here at home, the Chinese in the Philippines also played an important role as bridges of understanding and tolerance to ease the tension between both the people and the government. The four batches of Hong Kong interns (student volunteers) who worked with Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran for six weeks in the past four years, played a role also in explaining the Philippine situation to their friends, classmates and colleagues. Hong Kong residents who have long been in this country likewise gave media interviews to ease the tension. The people-to-people ties helped fill up the gaps where government-to-government diplomacy was found wanting.

The work of the IIRC was likewise crucial. The committee commenced hearings on September 1, 2010. Hong Kong representatives and tri-media (including those from Hong Kong) were allowed to sit in and witness the proceedings. The five-member committee interviewed witnesses and resource persons, undertook on site investigation, and held executive sessions on sensitive matters.

After the two-week marathon formal hearings, the joint technical committee of the DOJ and DILG, together with the committee members, helped one another in drafting the report. The IIRC members and resource persons sat down for deliberations, often well into the night. On September 17, the report was personally hand delivered to President Benigno S. Aquino III at Malacañang Palace.

China and Hong Kong authorities were quite impressed

with the report. They admitted that a comprehensive report like what was produced in such a limited time is something which, they themselves know they could never do. The transparency of the televised process, the thoroughness and exhaustiveness of the report, and the courage in pinpointing responsibilities assured them that the government indeed gave a lot of importance to knowing what happened and moving on from there. We hope the people responsible for this tragedy will be held accountable and this is the only way that can lead to the healing of wounds and recovery.

We pray that the Hong Kong victims can find forgiveness, tolerance and understanding for those who failed them. We look forward to the lifting of the travel ban to the Philippines and to improved relations after suffering setbacks lately. Much remains to be done but the long history of close relations are important building blocks that we can always depend on.

Postscript

The Office of the President released the first part of the IIRC report on the factual findings on September 20, 2010, just before President Aquino departed for a trip to the United States. The President announced that the second part of the report, the recommendations, is held in abeyance until the Palace legal team can review them thoroughly.

A week after, the full report (factual findings together with the recommendations), was leaked through the Internet. The full report was officially released by the Office of the President on October 11, 2010.

To the public's dismay, the recommendations were modified by the Palace legal team. Some government officials were completely cleared of their responsibility and others had their culpability downgraded. The Hong Kong authorities and the public expressed dissatisfaction over the greatly watered down recommendations. The IIRC members said

they respect the Palace decision because it is the President's prerogative but they stand by their recommendations.

Tour operators in the Philippines and in Hong Kong agitated for the lifting of the black advisory travel ban. Representations with the Hong Kong government continued to be made to further ease the tension. Tourism Secretary Alberto Lim was sent to Hong Kong on December 16, 2010 but he failed to have the advisory lifted.

On February 14, 2011, the Hong Kong's Coroner's Court started its own series of hearings about the hostage-taking incident. The Hong Kong government and people were unhappy that only one (Gregorio Mendoza, brother of the hostage taker) among the hundreds of witnesses subpoenaed was willing to testify.

On August 23, 2011, on the first anniversary of the hostage-taking incident, family members of the victims came to Manila to seek redress for damages in court, for an official apology from the Philippine government, and for compensation.

In the meantime, by October, when this monograph was finalized for publication, the black advisory travel ban imposed by the Hong Kong government has not been lifted.