

Chapter 1 The Politics of Disaster

"I do not want to forget Ormoc." The words came softly from Rosalio Goze, as he unfurled maps of Ormoc, Leyte, and spread out photos of the great flood that inundated the city on November 5, 1991. Four thousand people were killed by Typhoon Uring's wrathful waters and over 2,000 more could not be found.

Seven months after the tragedy, in his office at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in Quezon City, Goze continues to keep the records of the Ormoc disaster in his active file, on a small table just behind him. Even though he is no longer DENR director of the region that includes Leyte, the disaster continues to haunt him. "But we can't be crying all the time," Goze says. "Something should be done because the rains will come again and Ormoc is still a hazard."

Life in the provincial city of Ormoc is typically quiet and predictable. Its residents often spend their evenings promenading by the Ormoc bay to be soothed by the sound of the dancing waves. Many would flock to the Catholic Church for the evening novena. On the night of November 4, 1991, only the sound of the torrential rains kept the people of Ormoc company. The next morning, the downpour grew even more intense. At about 7:00 A.M., signal number one was announced on the morning radio news. Residents still went about their daily routines and schools at all levels held classes.

But the rains never ceased. Rainfall would later be reported to be the heaviest in 19 years.

As the downpour continued, the levels of the two main river systems, Anilao and Malbasag, rose and spilled into settlements lying along the river banks. Within minutes, the water level swelled from three feet to five feet, and then reached 10 to 12 feet above normal levels. In low-lying areas, the river was up to 20 feet above normal levels.

From 11:00 A.M. until 2:00 P.M., most streets and houses were already under water. A teacher later recalled that gigantic waves from the Anilao river came crashing down on houses and on people, sending bodies floating with refrigerators, furniture and slabs of wood.

The death toll was highest in the congested reclaimed embankments of the Anilao River and in Isla Verde, a crowded islet. There, most people were drowned or buried in mud as their houses were swept away.

The Ormoc flood was the worst disaster to strike the Philippines since July 1990, when an earthquake killed at least 1,700 people in Luzon. The tragedy cannot, however, be dismissed as an isolated occurrence and thereby forgotten, because the circumstances that led to the flooding are still very much present.



The Tragedy of Ormoc

Ormoc can be considered a microcosm of Philippine society. It weaves together a feudal structure where a small number of families control most of the land while the rest of the population are landless, displaced by plantations. In desperation, the landless go to the uplands, following the trails left by logging companies, to fend for themselves. There, they engage in *kaingin* or shifting cultivation, which harms the forests.

The more massive deforestation, however, can be traced to the government policy of land conversion, the private use of watershed land and logging. Like many of the Philippine towns and cities, Ormoc is situated at the mouth of major river systems. Drainage has been constricted by improper land use and cropping patterns in the uplands. The watershed function of these lands has been severely impaired.

In the aftermath of the Ormoc floods, many were quick to blame illegal logging for the devastation. In reality, the disaster was caused by deforestation - the result of decades-old government land use policies, the conversion of forest land to agriculture and logging.

Only 10 percent of Ormoc is forested. Ninety percent of the land in the 4,500-hectare Ormoc watershed is agricultural, mostly sugar and coconut plantations. The area has been declared a reservation to be administered by the Philippine National Oil Company, which oversees the operations of the Tongonan geothermal energy project.

Commercial logging, which began in the 1930s, and the conversion of forests into agricultural lands, which was encouraged in the 1950s, have taken a heavy toll on the land. During World War II, logging in Ormoc was temporarily halted but resumed immediately after it ended.

The logging business thrived. There was a euphoric rush to export lumber to Japan in the 1960s, but was suddenly stopped by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1972. The rumor then was that Marcos's cronies or family would take over the medium-sized logging concession in northern Leyte, but that never happened. Instead, the 30,000-hectare concession was abandoned, and neither the government nor the local communities made any move to protect it.

Government Policy and Land Use

In the 1950s, as logging continued, the government under President Elpidio Quirino opened public lands for private ownership. Quirino had also earlier conceived the first Colonization Act designed to give land to the farmers. The government bought land and resold it to tenants on an installment basis.

Quirino also called for the surveying, subdivision and development of wide tracts of virgin lands in the south. Expansion of sugarcane and coconut plantations accelerated after 1952, when the central government, which was influenced by "sugar bloc" votes in



Congress, announced that government lands with a gradient less than 18 percent would be classified as "alienable and disposable" and would be available for private purchase. However, the worldwide shortage of sugar in the late 1970s, which pushed the price of sugar higher, encouraged the sugar farmers to plant slopes steeper than 18 percent to sugarcane.

By 1990, 90 percent of the Ormoc watershed had been converted to sugarcane and coconut plantations. This policy of land conversion did not begin with Quirino, however. President Manuel L. Quezon, during his term (1935-1941), created the Land Settlement and Development Corporation. The idea was to purchase big landed estates for distribution to tenants. Forest lands were cleared to give way to settlers.

Similarly, Ramon Magsaysay, who was president from 1953 to 1957, pursued his "Land for the Landless" program, and set up the National Rehabilitation and Resettlement Project (NRRP). Returning Huk rebels and the unemployed were encouraged to migrate to parts of Mindanao, Palawan and Mindoro. In 1953 alone, close to half a million hectares of forest and agricultural lands were distributed in Cotabato, Isabela, Palawan, Bukidnon, Nueva Ecija and Rizal.

"We cleared forest lands for the settlers," recalls Julian de Vera, head of the Land Tenure Administration during Magsaysay's time. "We converted forest lands to agricultural lands in many parts of the country." Magsaysay ordered the reclassification of some forest lands to agricultural lands to make more land available for the landless. The president also looked at land conversion as a solution to *kaingin*. Rather than have *kaingineros* arrested, he gave them land they could plant on.

The homestead system, which was introduced in the Philippines with the enactment of the Public Land Act in 1903, also allowed the government to give each individual 16 hectares of uncultivated public land if the recipient could demonstrate that he could care for it. Until the late 1960s, the government was opening up virgin forest lands and encouraging people to settle there.

The land conversion policy partly alleviated the poor's hunger for land. It was a choice the government had to make -- faced with a growing population and the inequitable distribution of land. But it was a limited response, unaccompanied by a massive land reform and population control program.

In Ormoc, the government's opening up of public land led to a scramble for converting forests into sugar plantations. Some lands were acquired through the homestead act under Magsaysay, while others were bought. Ownership of these lands has hardly changed. Until the present, five families have owned most of the agricultural land located in the Ormoc watershed. The Larrazabal family owns the largest parcel, 4,127,598 square meters. The Seraficas own more than 2,000,000 square meters; the Pongos, 794,097 square meters; the Torres family, 1,718,017 square meters; and the Torrevillas family, 520,065 square meters. The conversion of parcels of forests to agricultural land caused the soil to become less cohesive, more prone to erosion.



Experts from the US Army Corps of Engineers identified "soil instability" as one of the factors that caused the floods. Landslides triggered mud and debris flows. Soils were totally saturated. Side slopes were weakened to the point of failure. The DENR reports that the land use to which the watershed has been subjected drastically reduced its capacity for rainfall absorption.

The Ormoc Elite

"Oh, our family had no problems logging then. People were happy to have jobs and to buy wood from us. If we were not there, residents had to buy their wood from Mindanao," recalls Paquito Serafica, a 65-year old businessman who belongs to one of the wealthiest families in Ormoc. The Seraficas, along with the Pongos, pioneered the logging industry in Ormoc. They began in 1936, operating a 5,000-hectare concession with their own sawmill. They were interrupted by World War II, but resumed logging in 1946.

Heavy bombing and fighting during the war not only killed people but also destroyed trees. Shrapnel was found embedded in trees. After the war, the government issued permits to fell damaged trees but cutting became indiscriminate. Even young trees were cut and large areas were cleared.

The lush forest and agricultural potential of Leyte attracted the likes of the Seraficas, who come from Pangasinan, and the Larrazabals, who later diversified into such businesses as cattle ranching, hotels and real estate development.

The Larrazabals also entered politics. Potenciano, the son of the clan patriarch Felipe, was twice appointed mayor of Ormoc, first by the Americans and later by President Diosdado Macapagal. Another son, Inake, served 20 years as mayor under President Ferdinand Marcos.

A daughter of Potenciano, Victoria, was elected mayor in 1987. Her family supported Corazon Aquino's bid for the presidency in 1986, a risky choice in the province where Imelda Marcos hails from. Because the Larrazabals' political instincts proved right, their fortunes survived the aftermath of the Marcos administration. Victoria lost her bid for another term in 1992. Her husband, Carmelo Locsin, represents the province in Congress. Locsin, who is also president of the Ormoc Sugarcane Planters Association and a key official of the National Federation of Sugarcane Planters, belongs to the prominent family of sugar planters from Iloilo.

The New Rich

Eufrocino "Dodong" M. Codilla Sr. is the new mayor of Ormoc. A fresh name in Ormoc politics, he has broken the continuity of the Larrazabals' reign. The Codillas are not of old wealth but are upstarts, the new rich of Ormoc. Mayor Dodong did not even attend college because his parents could not afford to pay for his education. He had to start



working after high school. To earn money in his youth, Mayor Dodong entered bicycling contests. A photograph hanging prominently in his office displays his winning form, then Ormoc's champion cyclist. Cycling did not, however, provide a year-long income. Off season, he sold clothes, rice, and, later, after doing brisk business, expanded into lumber, GI sheets and nails.

It was in selling lumber and construction materials that the would-be mayor made his fortune, a fact that the Codillas would never forget. On their living room wall is a quaint, black-and-white photograph of the smiling Codilla children, perched on a pile of lumber.

Although he has eventually diversified and now owns a 100-hectare sugar plantation, a cockpit and gasoline station, Mayor Dodong knows the lumber business best. During his political campaign, however, his lumber dealership caused him problems. The Larrazabals accused him of buying illegally cut logs.

The Codilla children are quick to explain their position. "We were blamed for the floods. We were accused of illegal logging," says Edwin, an articulate young man who manages his father's motor pool. As an afterthought, he added: "Without the flood, perhaps, we won't be here in politics."

Immediately after the 1991 disaster, the DENR did not renew the licenses of lumber dealers in Ormoc. Codilla, the largest lumber dealer in the city, had no recourse but to stop selling wood. Public vigilance was high and the DENR was under intense pressure to do something in the wake of the disaster. Eventually, Codilla had to limit himself to selling coco lumber, the only wood allowed to be processed and sold.

When Codilla joined the mayoral race a few months later, he was accused of being an illegal logger by his political enemies, particularly the Larrazabals who are no longer involved in logging. However, no proof of illegal transactions by Codilla could be presented. In return, Codilla reminded residents that the Larrazabals were not innocent. They once cut down Ormoc's forests, he said during the campaign.

The surprising defeat of Mayor Locsin to an alleged illegal logger was attributed to several factors. Some say they wanted change, that the Larrazabals had been in power too long and no other businesses were profiting except theirs. Some empathized with Codilla, who they found was more like one of them. He knew how it was to be poor. During the last stretch of her term, former Mayor Victoria Locsin was faced with a difficult proposition. The DENR said it was important for the landowners to reforest parts of their plantations, a proposal that did not sit well with the five Ormoc families, including the mayor's, who own most of the Ormoc watershed and have planted it with sugarcane.

Maribel Munsayac, community environment and natural resources officer of Ormoc, is determined to work with the landowners. During Mayor Locsin's term, she and her DENR colleagues met three times with the landlords to explain that parts of the watershed needed to be reforested. The area along river banks should be revegetated because nothing is holding the soil together. They preached the merits of contour farming



whereby trees along contours in sugar cane and coconut plantations be planted to serve as "run-off buffer" and wind breaks. It would prevent erosion.

They also recommended total planting in environmentally sensitive areas such as erosion-prone sites and highly steep portions, the planting of trees and other plants (like bamboos) in great density, and the planting of permanent trees 20 meters from the normal high waterline of rivers. If trees had covered half of the agricultural area, the DENR people reminded the landowners, about 50 percent of the total rainfall that led to the disaster would have been absorbed. Casualties would have been less.

The landowners agreed to study the proposals, Munsayac, a persistent worker, remembers. "We're motivating them. We'll provide technical assistance and help look for financing." She hopes that if one, even just one, landowner will agree, that landowner can be the model. But the landowners are wary. With the floods behind them, they do not feel a sense of urgency about planting permanent trees on their private, profitable sugar and coconut plantations. It is the return on investment, or the lack of it, that is holding them back. "Theoretically, tree farms are good. But we have to invest. Even with financing, landowners have to give a counterpart. And, it will take 15 to 20 years before we can harvest," explains Paquito Serafica.

The right species, meaning one that is fast-growing and commercially viable, would entice them, Serafica continues. "Eucalyptus would be one of the best. In 12 years, we can start harvesting. Then we can stop importing electric poles. But I don't go out sticking my nose there. I'll tell them what to do if they ask me."

Convincing the landowners will be one of the first tasks Mayor Codilla will have. It may be easy to ask them to cooperate because, after all, most of them backed him in the elections. But it could also mean that they can persuade the new mayor to train his sights on other anti-flood measures.

In an interview before he assumed office, Codilla talked about the priority he will give to building flood control structures. With pen and paper, he sketched the rivers running through Ormoc and pointed to the sites where such structures should be. But lacking in confidence and inadequate in Pilipino and English, Mayor Codilla cut short the interview and asked his son, Edwin, who is fluent in English, to take over. What was his father's response to the DENR proposals? "It will be difficult to convince the landowners," Edwin says.

Serafica is a Codilla supporter. He may cooperate with the new administration, but he says: "How he (Codilla) will run Ormoc will depend on who the brains behind him will be." Former Mayor Locsin says that for as long as they are not intimidated and forced into doing things, that they are reasoned with, they can work with Mayor Codilla.

The city council could be a key influence on Mayor Codilla. Jose Alfaro, one of the newly elected councilors, will make the rehabilitation of the Ormoc watershed his banner program. A member of the Ormoc Coalition of political parties (KBL, LDP, NCP, PDP-



Laban) that supported Codilla, Alfaro was also the president of a local environmental group, SOS Earth, and campaigned on an environmental protection program. He hopes to garner support from other councilors and the vice-mayor who was also with SOS Earth.

The Isle of Death

Isla Verde is a strip of land bound by the Anilao river. Except for a few coconut trees, there is little other vegetation on the, islet. To Ormocanons, Isla Verde is a sad reminder of the November 1991 deluge. It was on this patch of earth where the most people were killed by the floods. Houses were washed away. From a community of 2,500, only about 200 are said to have survived. "Isle of death," some have called it.

The local government had declared it uninhabitable, but because of the hunger for land and the convenience offered by Isla Verde - it is just a short tricycle ride away from the city center - old residents have come back, joined by new migrants. There are no signs in the area saying no one is supposed to live on the islet anymore. No government official comes over to tell the new residents to leave.

"We prefer it here," Selmo Baylon, an old resident, says. "*Bihira lang naman 'yan.*" (Anyway, floods like the last one are rare.) Selmo had repaired his doors and windows and had just added reinforcement to the roof. How long was his family gone from Isla Verde? Two days, only two days. And they cannot imagine living elsewhere.

A few months after the Ormoc tragedy, the survivors of Isla Verde tell their story matter-of-factly, as if it was nothing serious. "The waters kept rising. We had to place our children on top of the refrigerator. Still, the waters kept going up so we all had to climb to the roof. But perhaps we are blessed. We all survived."

Even if Isla Verde has been declared a no-man's land, the problem of relocating the residents remains. The local government is unable to offer enough attractive alternative sites near their places of work. As it is, land allocated for resettlement is inadequate. The city plans to resettle 2,668 families and the major resettlement area, Tambulilid, can only offer 912 houses. Thus, the rest continue to live in a hazardous zone.

