



Editorial & Opinion

Quite a reception

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By Rina Jimenez-David

IN THE 10 days that they were in the country, they experienced a typhoon, a landslide and an armed mutiny. While their prime minister was here on an official visit, a convicted international terrorist, implicated in the tragic Bali bombing that killed more than 100 Australians, strolled out of his jail cell and remains at large. To top it off, Australian Ambassador Ruth Pearce was trapped inside the Oakwood serviced-apartments building in Makati City during the mutiny last Sunday of the Magdalo group of junior military officers.

Despite this series of catastrophic events, however, a group of visiting Australian parliamentarians, together with parliamentarians from Tonga, Kiribati and Papua New Guinea, say they are convinced that the Philippines remains a "safe" place, and that they will assure their constituents and colleagues of this fact when they return to Australia.

"The people are very generous, open and hospitable," remarked Harry Quick, federal member for Franklin of the Australian Parliament. John Hyde, a member of the Western Australia Legislative Assembly, was enthused no end by his weeklong stay in the resort island of Boracay, which he visited before the study tour commenced. Most of all, says Kelly Hoare, MP for Charlton, they went around the country and talked with people not just in Manila but also in the provinces of Leyte, Cebu, Iloilo and Guimaras.

Among their memorable experiences during the study tour, organized locally by the Philippine NGO Council, were visits to Concepcion and Ajuy towns in Iloilo province in the central Philippines, where they heard young and dynamic town mayors explain their projects seeking to integrate reproductive health and family planning concerns with environmental preservation and resource allocation. Quick was also quite impressed after his visit to an urban poor neighborhood in Malabon City in Metro Manila, where the reproductive health service organization Likhaan maintains a base community.

"I ended up ankle-deep in mud," remarks Quick, "but I saw clearly that despite their abject poverty, the people are determined to change things themselves."

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SO IMPRESSED were the visiting parliamentarians with what they saw and heard during their visit that they were inspired to issue a statement on the reproductive health situation in the Philippines.

Their central message: "Australian aid must be more appropriately targeted through NGOs and LGUs [local government units] who have been so successful in addressing the challenges of population, development, reproductive health and the environment."

Australia, through AusAid, sends a yearly average of 61 million Australian dollars to the Philippines, they said. But most of the amount goes to defense and security projects, especially in Mindanao. After their tour, the lawmakers said they were convinced more of the aid money must go "directly to NGOs and communities where it could make such a big difference in people's lives."

In addition to taking a sharper, closer look at where Australian aid money goes, the visiting officials also urged the Australian government to "bridge the gap" created by "the US decision to withdraw funding for the distribution of contraceptives in the Philippines."

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"WE are pleased to see how the Philippines, particularly at the local level, is addressing the serious challenges in population growth and development issues and the Group is committed to supporting, cooperating and collaborating at all levels to make further advances in these areas," said the lawmakers, members of the Australian All Party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development.

"We support the right of Filipino women to be better educated on issues of reproductive health and for them to be fully involved in decisions on these issues. We encourage the Philippine government to continue to promote and support reproductive health and population issues with appropriate legislative measures," the statement concludes.

This seems a remote possibility, though, since President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in her State of the Nation Address on Monday, seems to have slammed the door, quite forcefully, on legislation that seeks to protect and promote the reproductive health and rights of our citizens. In fact, she even virtually called Senator Rodolfo Biazon and the members of Congress behind the Reproductive Health Care Act of being "sneaks," practically accusing them of "smuggling" abortion by way of legislation!

It seems the visiting lawmakers from Australia and the Pacific, after just over a week's visit, have gained more understanding of and insight into the reproductive health situation in this country than our President, who even dares to proudly call herself a woman and an economist.

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FLYING into Manila Sunday morning from Iloilo together with Senate President Franklin Drilon who joined them there, the visiting lawmakers also heard bits and pieces of the crisis brewing in Makati City. Though they were booked into the Manila Hotel, they confessed to feeling quite apprehensive, not knowing how long the standoff with the military mutineers would continue and how it would end.

Over breakfast Tuesday, the relief on their faces was quite palpable, but their praise for the people they met around the country seemed quite genuine and heartfelt. A state representative from Tasmania, which is itself one of the poorer areas in Australia, vowed that when he reached home, he would talk to the teachers and students in his area and plan "some sort of linkage with a local school in Iloilo or Cebu" to help the children he had met there.

Itself beset with population challenges, such as a falling fertility level, the over-concentration of people in five big cities, and environmental degradation, Australia seems ready for a relationship based on people-to-people sharing with the Philippines, believing, as the visitors said, "restoring communities and empowering people costs a lot less than letting a country fall apart."