Show light and hope

What an apt message this Christmas season coming no less from the Philippine President, Benigno S. Aquino III. The message comes at a time when millions of Filipinos are still reeling from the massive devastation caused by super typhoon Yolanda, the most powerful howler to hit the Philippines and the world this year. Imagine the damage and losses from that typhoon — a whopping P571 billion! With over 6,000 dead and almost 2,000 still missing and 900,000 houses destroyed in 12 regions, especially Leyte and Samar provinces, that's a real catastrophe! A month before Yolanda, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake wreaked havoc on the island of Bohol, destroying roads, bridges, schools, towns and its priceless historical and centuries-old churches. And a month before the Bohol temblor, Muslim rebels purportedly belonging to former governor and the Moro National Liberation Front chairman Nur Misuari showed up with arms in the shores of Zamboanga City, scaring the people and the military itself. Even while the rebels' objective by their own admission was only to march peacefully to show up support for the newly proclaimed independence of their Bangsamoro State, misfires and the military's failure to communicate with the rebels and forge a truce resulted to an almost month-long bombing and shelling destroying hundreds of houses and buildings in the process and loss of lives on both sides — the government and the rebels.

But tragedies upon tragedies, natural or man-made, the Filipinos have proven their resilience and their capacity to rise amidst difficulties. And they are rising again from the rubble of the recent massive destruction. Their determination to survive and rise again has caught the attention of the world as many countries readily bough relief and necessary assistance and aid are still coming from within and across the globe. Thanks to the worldwide reportage by international media groups like CNN for that. United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, for one, initiated a global effort for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction with a goal to raising $742 million for the effort from UN member-countries. When the UN chief arrived in Manila and visited Tacloban City to see himself the destruction, more than 30 percent of the goal has been raised and he called on other countries to speed up the release of aid.

In the words of President Aquino, Filipinos affected by recent tragedies gave inspiration and hope to many people. In the case of residents of Bohol after last October's quake, they showed fellow Filipinos what is possible. Overseas Filipinos around the world also joined forces to help their countrymen. Indeed, the Filipinos are showing to the world that with unity and determination, one can stand up again after storms. Let this be the message for all people this Christmas season.
Apocalypse and beyond

As we go to the press, many more bodies are discovered among the debris, the shoreline and devastated areas as hundreds more litter the streets of Tacloban City and other areas badly battered by super typhoon Yolanda. Officials have placed the fatalities at over 10,000 even as many remote towns and areas have not yet been reached by search and rescue teams. Due to lack of food, water and shelter, many survivors, including businessmen, are in frantic mode to escape from the disaster area.

Apart from offering prayers and moral support, many countries and international organizations have provided immediate relief assistance, with the United States and Great Britain even assigning two warships to rush to the Visayas with their support and facilities. The United Nations, on the other hand, has called for at least $300 million donation from member countries. The Pope for his part was the first to extend his sympathies to the typhoon victims even as he called on the Catholics to provide help.

Filipinos and Filipino Americans in the United States and Canada who readily organized fund drives and collected materials to be sent home were happy that President Barack Obama himself called up Philippine President Benigno Aquino Tuesday to express sorrow for the destruction left by super typhoon Yolanda and to coordinate US help. Reports from Washington stated that Obama expressed America’s “deep condolences for the lives lost and the damage caused” by the storm that is feared to have killed more than 10,000 people. White House spokesman Jay Carney said that Obama had ordered his administration to mount a “swift and coordinated response to save lives and provide assistance to alleviate suffering” even as the aircraft carrier USS George Washington and several escort ships had been dispatched to the Philippines.

A deluge of relief goods, necessities, shelter and other assistance thus will flood the Visayas and the country in the coming days. Apart from these foreign aid, the Philippine government and the Filipinos themselves have been extending assistance to the typhoon victims. We hope that every typhoon victim will get help and new shelter or homes and the relief goods will not be kitted into the homes and private warehouses of community leaders as has been experienced in the past. In the meantime, government leaders and citizens must start its response to the lessons learned from this experience which has been likened to an apocalypse never before experienced by the country. And from the rubble, with its indomitable spirit, the Filipinos shall rise again.

San Bruno, Vallejo Council bets win

Filipino American incumbents on two sides of San Francisco Bay kept their seats in the Nov. 5 elections, leaving a valuable lesson for other aspirants.

West of the bay in San Bruno and up north in Vallejo incumbents and their supporters led celebrations shortly after results emerged.

San Bruno City Council member Ken Ibara, a licensed architect, garnered 1,789 votes or 29.1 percent, placing second in a field four.

The 17-year veteran owns Ibara and Associates, a building contractor specializing in kitchen and bath remodeling. Ibara founded after earning his BS in Architecture at California Polytechnic State University-San Luis Obispo.

First elected in 1996, Ibara is the second seniormost elected Filipino American in the region. (Daily City Council member Michael Guingona was elected three years earlier.)

Vallejo FilAms cemented their political power with the re-election of Jess Malago and election of Rozzana Verder-Aliga to the City Council.

Retired Navy command Malago topped the contest for the long-term council post with 6,321 or 20.3 percent of the votes.

With 5,556 votes for a whopping 47.20 percent, Verder-Aliga, a former County School Board trustee, was the lone winner to complete the term vacated by Erin Hanagian, who was elected in the previous race for Solano County Supervisor.

“Seeing forward and address the most pressing issues in the city like public safety, crime reduction, jobs, economic development, financial stability and recovery as well as infrastructure and road repairs, we have to work together and focus on what is good for Vallejo, not individual agendas or interests,” said Verder-Aliga, a former mental health services manager and 32-year resident of the city.

Malago offered a sobering analysis of his impressive showing.

“I think the story of this campaign from the Filipino community standpoint is that two FilAms candidates were in the race but did not compete with each other. Rozzana and I actually support each other. The atmosphere within the community is positive for once: We are not divided,” Malago said at a victory party.

The lesson is magnified in Daly City, where Filipino American campaigners were split between two FilAm candidates for the Jefferson Elementary School District Board of Trustees.

Daly City Mayor Ray Buenaventura and Personnel Commissioner Perla Ibarriertos endorsed casino employee Walter Batara, while Council Member Guingona and incumbent JESS trustee Joseph Otyade endorsed retired official Larry Formales.

Results showed the two FilAms last among six candidates for three seats with two incumbents running. The topnotcher was a new hopeful. - EDUARDO YRA

CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT.
Blinded by money and power

The good news is that it is only October and the House of Representatives already has approved and final reading the Philippine national government budget entailing a record P2.68 trillion, the highest in the history of the Philippines. With the House approval, the Senate is expected to follow suit in its ongoing scheduled sessions. This is a stark contrast with the previous administration when the budget, officially called the General Appropriations Act (GAA), was not passed even by yearday, resulting in a re-constituted budget.

But amidst this good record, something critics of the pork barrel termed as unexpected and maybe bad happened with the newly approved budget. This is the reported abolition of the Senator’s P200 million and Congressmen’s P70 million annual allotments called the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) which more popularly known as pork barrel. While in the surface, the lawmakers’ pork barrel which totalled P4.5 billion was abolished, the truth is it was merely re-channelled to the different departments of the national government – not in identifiable line budgets but in lumpsum just like the pork barrel. Also, the P200 million lumpsum fund of the Office of the Vice President in the proposed national budget for 2014 were realigned to at least six government agencies. On the other hand, the lumpsum appropriations or pork barrel of the Office of the President, which is estimated at P964 billion, remains in the proposed 2014 national budget.

Rep. Isidro Ungab of Davao, who is the chairman of the House of Representatives appropriations committee, identified the agencies where the lawmakers’ pork barrel were now lumpsum. These are the Department of Health (DOH), Department of Education (DepEd), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) which got a share of P3 billion to P6 billion, the highest each.

The people’s rage over the pork barrel and the lawmakers who are shown to have abused it started when businesswoman Janet Lim Napoles was exposed by no less than her cousin and former trusted staff for allegedly masterminding a P10 billion pork barrel scam. This resulted in the filing of plunder charges before the Ombudsman against former Senator-President Juan Ponce Enrile, former Senate President Teodoro Locsin Estrada and Sen. Ramon Revilla, Napoles herself and several others. It was revealed that another batch of lawmakers will be charged by the Department of Justice with the same offense possibly next week.

In the meantime, Napoles has been summoned by the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee to appear in the continuation of its hearings on the pork barrel issue on November 7. Will she tell all? Will she implicate more lawmakers in the scam? Due to the gravity of the case and those involved, and the controversy on the hitherto unknown Disbursement Acceleration Program (DAP) involving billions of people’s money, the people will be watching what will be the action of the Ombudsman and the steps to be taken by the government. For one, the Commission on Audit is being asked to complete its audit report on the PDAF – and DAP, too, to cover also the administration of President Aquino to prove to all and sundry that it is not biased against the opposition. President Aquino, our lawmakers and officials should not be blind on the clamor of the people. First and foremost, they should not be blinded by thirst for more money to play around and stay in power at the expense of the people from where the money emanated through the taxes they pay to the government.
On more US troops in Phl

Negotiations have started on how more American soldiers, equipment, including war ships and air planes and war materials, could be stationed on rotational basis in the Philippines. The idea is to provide greater support to the Philippines force in keeping with the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Treaty and Visiting Forces Agreement as the Philippines continue to suffer from continued bullying and aggression from China which claims almost all islands and reefs in the West Philippine Sea and the bigger South China Sea. The greater objective though is to ensure free access and passage by all to international waters in the area considering that the bulk of cargoes in the region pass through it.

Higher authorities actually started the talks months ago with the blessing of US President Barack Obama when military and state or foreign affairs officials convened in dialogues in Washington and in Hawaii and discussed America’s plan to increase its presence in the Asia Pacific region, considered as the fastest growing economy in the world. Then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Defense Secretary Leon Panetta on the part of the US government and Foreign Affairs Secretary Albert del Rosario and Defense Secretary Voltaire Gazmin led the talks for the Philippines. The negotiations which opened this week in Manila is a continuation of the negotiations that aims to spell out the terms and conditions of the expected increased rotational presence of American forces in the Philippines.

The militaries readily criticized the plan for more troops to be stationed in the Philippines, claiming that it violates the Philippine Constitution which bans the return of American bases in the country. Secretaries del Rosario and Gazmin, however, assured that the agreement that will be reached will take into account the Philippine Constitution and other pacts and treaties like the MDT and the VFA. And precisely, they decided to be transparent in the negotiations, informing officially even both chambers of Congress about the negotiations.

Whether the impending agreement would be for the good of the Philippines and the greater good of the region or not is still very hard to tell considering that negotiations are still ongoing and the details of any agreement are yet to be finalized. So there should be no rush judgement on the matter. Let’s give the negotiators from the Philippines and the United States time to examine thoroughly the proposal and the conditions therein. After all, whatever deal they will approve will still be presented to higher authorities and presumably Congress for further study and approval.
A RISING TIDE SINKS SOME BOATS
A cartoon for the April 10, 2013 edition of the Philippines Today. A rising economy so far hasn’t lifted up the poor and many of the middle class in Silicon Valley.

NATIONAL NEWS

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

New hope for veterans

On April 9, the Philippines again recalled the heroism of the country’s soldiers, especially the war veterans, with appropriate ceremonies at the Dambana ng Kabayanihan atop Mt. Samat in Pilar, Bataan. Ironically, the main protagonists of that war were present at the ceremonies – the United States and Japan represented by their respective ambassadors to Manila, Ambassador Toshinao Urase and Ambassador Harry K. Thomas, and the Philippines led by President Benigno S. Aquino III.

As the ceremonies unfolded, veterans, many of them in their late 80s and 90s, and a handful in their centenary years, expressed gratitude and happiness for being remembered for their exploits in defense of country, democracy and freedom against the invaders. Many war veterans, especially those who served under the American forces, also expressed the hopes that their benefits from the United States and Philippine governments be upgraded in keeping with the needs of the times.

It was timely that President Benigno S. Aquino III announced during the commemoration the US government’s effective implementation of the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation Law. The Chief Executive said that some 18,700 Filipino veterans were already given their $15,000 and $9,000 compensation totaling to US$ 224 million as of January this year. Thousands more, however, among the veterans, especially those not listed by the US government, are waiting for their compensation and benefits.

The President also disclosed that the Philippine government continues to push more initiatives for additional pension benefits and compensations and medical services to veterans who fought during the Second World War. He said that in addition to their regular benefits, the war veterans will get additional P1,700 benefit every month for those who have reached 70 years old.

The country’s war veterans who are in the twilight of their lives need more than additional compensation and benefits, but recognition and care from us who benefited from their bravery, exploits and heroism during the war. It behooves upon the Philippine and American leaders to attend to their needs while they are still with us.