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The Philippine horror story

The full impact of the Ampatuan massacre has yet to settle in. This is a butchery of unbelievable horror, almost unheard of in peacetime. It's what the Nazis did to the Jews during the war, it's what Hutu militia did to the Tutsis. It's not what civilians do to other civilians.

The depth of depravity here just cannot be envisioned. The Philippines has become a failed state unless there is immediate action. The number of people killed, the type of people killed—innocents, and the manner of killing (mutilation, burying alive, dumping in a mass grave) go far, far beyond anything that can begin to be accepted in decent society.

Genalyn, the wife of Vice Mayor Mangudadatu, cried to her husband on the phone that Mayor Ampatuan was about to kill her. He did! You need no more than that to incarcerate him and all around him. Or do you think Mangudadatu was lying? Come on, torn apart by the loss of his wife, he's going to think of nefarious political ploys? The brazenness of it defies belief, no doubt driven by the friendship the Ampatuans claimed with the President. "Friends"—no friends of mine would ever do something like this, and if they did that friendship would be destroyed immediately. And it would be the same if they were family members, there'd be no protection from me, I'd turn them in (ADB couple please note).

The President owes the Ampatuans nothing now; whatever debt of gratitude she may have had for them has been wiped out by this wipe-out of human lives.

As a start, all the Ampatuan clan who are in politics should be in jail, arguing from there their innocence. If that violates legal due process I couldn't care less, they violated in the most unimaginable way due process of society. And everyone involved must be similarly incarcerated, "I was following orders, I had no choice" is not acceptable.

No Ampatuan, or anyone within the third degree of consanguinity, should be allowed to run for political office next year. Their power must be broken completely and this is an important first step to doing so. If the Commission on Elections can ban harmless gays who've killed no one on spurious moral grounds, it better ban mass murderers. (The Comelec should, by the way, allow gays to run, we'll decide if they should win or not. It's our decision, not of a few myopic moralists.)

All the family's assets should be confiscated, sold and the proceeds given to the families of the dead. All the properties of the Ampatuans must be raided and the modern rifles found and confiscated, not the old Garands that have been surrendered. The army commanders who refused protection should be in jail too, not just suspended. Examples must be set, it must be clear this level of depravity can't be tolerated

The President declared a state of emergency, do these things under that state. If it goes outside the law, let the Ampatuans sue.

I wish we had Ping Lacson in charge now, his no-nonsense toughness is exactly what's needed. President Arroyo needs to take an uncompromising, ruthless stand. We need a president that will act swiftly, draconially and ruthlessly. Just one little point for the President: 30 journalists were killed—this is the most ever, anywhere in the world, in the modern history of the world. This is carnage of unbelievable proportions, I'm still shaking at the thought of it.

Mrs. President, Genalyn Mangudadatu had her eyes pierced with a spear, her breasts shot and her private parts slashed. Mrs. President if this were Luli, how would you feel? You cannot be standing back now? Get these criminals—today!

In the last elections "only 141 people were killed". "Only"? In 2004, 186 were murdered. In the last Australian elections "only no people were killed". We're up to 40 percent of that 141 already and will certainly exceed it if immediate retribution with no quarters given isn't done. Remember these are human beings, people God gave life too. They could have been your friends, even relatives. Next time they may be.

Mayor Ampatuan should be in solitary confinement inaccessible to anyone but his lawyer. The prosecution better do a very good job, God help us if these murderers get off on some technicality or "insufficient proof". I would hope that's not a legacy they'd want to leave behind. And I call upon his lawyer to have a conscience, and not try and get his clients off on some technicality. If this case were thrown out over a technicality there should be a revolution, there would be a revolution. Fifty-seven human beings were slaughtered. I know that's not taught in law school, but law school equips you to deal in society, not in hell. Which is where Ampatuan deals—and belongs.

I was going to argue for the death penalty again, but on reflection a lifetime in solitary confinement in an underground vault with NO connection to anyone, except the guard who throws scraps of food to him would do just fine. Vindictive? Cruel? Inhuman? Absolutely, he mercilessly murdered 57 innocent souls. There are times when the laws of society can't cope. This is such a time.

Think about this too as just the first collateral damage. The top news in the international news is the massacre. But unlike here it didn't happen in Maguindanao, it happened in the Philippines. The whole country has been tarred with the brush. Foreign investors will think twice, if they'll think at all about investing in a country where such ruthless murders can occur, and can occur where a government doesn't act with draconian swiftness.

Already the Australian government has come out with an advisory warning Aussies of the dangers of traveling to the Philippines. Yet here are some in government so out of touch with reality that they even say in the early days Ampatuans are friends. And now the Star (Sunday) quotes Justice Agnes Devanadera as saying "The mounting public outcry and international pressure have prompted President Arroyo to use all government resources to arrest and prosecute those behind the Maguindanao massacre". Does the President concur with that, that it needs public and international pressure to act? Because that's what that statement says, it strongly implies action would not have happened without that pressure.

For too long this society has turned a blind eye on warlords, well 30 journalists and 27 innocent civilians have paid the full price: Their lives have been brutally terminated by these tolerated warlords.

And it's not as if government didn't know. Ramon Tulfo wrote in his Nov. 26 column that he met Gov. Andal Ampatuan in Naia years ago with over 30 (he lost count) bodyguards and questioned how could this be allowed. He was told it was OK because he is an ally of the administration. The extent of warlordism

has been known—and tolerated—for years with a blind eye turned. Well, now, 57 innocent people have been turned blind forever.

This is a tipping point in Philippine society. If the normal processes prevail and little happens (remember the conjugal half of the murderer Marcos still struts around town 23 years after they were kicked out in revolt by the people) then there is no hope for the Philippines in my lifetime. No wonder it has sunk to the bottom in all measures of a society in Asia.

Will this be the tipping point? It won't be if you, the reader, don't act, join forces to demand reform from our corrupt leaders. Don't for an instant think they'll now act honorably—unless there is such public pressure. Wear a black ribbon to express your anger, and sympathy for our fellowmen and women who are now dead.

I'm not inciting to revolution, I'm calling on President Arroyo to recognize the absolute seriousness, the absolute horror of this massacre and act with immediate forcefulness toward a conclusive judgment very, very swiftly.

Let me end by quoting something we should all take to heart.

"First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a communist;

Then they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist;

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist;

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew;

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak out for me".

—Friedrich Gustav Emil Martin Niemöller, a German pastor imprisoned by Hitler.

I can't stand back. Can you?