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Social worker nun brings Church to support 'neglected' survivors

by N.J. Viehland

Manila, Philippines — Benedictine Sr. Edita Eslopor and fellow Typhoon Haiyan survivors gained Cardinal Luis Tagle's support for their effort to press the Philippines government for more efficient and humanitarian response to the crisis left by the devastating typhoon that hit the central Philippines in November.

Tagle after discussions with representatives of People Surge, which Eslopor chairs, offered to submit the group's petition and some of the 17,785 petitioners' signatures to President Benigno Aquino III along with the cardinal's endorsement letter.

The group, which claims 12,000 members in Eastern Visayas region, wants the government to distribute cash relief of 40,000 pesos (U.S. \$900) to each survivor's family. They also want it to continue handing out relief goods to survivors in remote areas, scrap the prohibition to rebuild homes in designated zones and involve survivors in planning for rehabilitation in their province.

On Feb. 17, 23 People Surge representatives went with Eslopor to try to submit their petition to Aquino. They marched to the presidential headquarters in Malacanang with scores of supporters from NGO and cause-oriented parties, but Aquino did not meet them in person.

On Wednesday, the fifth month after Haiyan, Tagle hosted the meeting with the six People Surge members and two supporters at his residence in Intramuros. Eslopor and the group told him most of the survivors helped so far are those around Tacloban and surrounding cities, while many other families farther away and in the mountains have been starving, homeless and without income.

A priest and parish workers have reported to the nun that elder people and a baby have died in recent

months. She blamed government's criminal neglect.

Tagle also offered to send food and other relief goods to areas not reached by government aid. He asked Eslopor to submit a list of these areas and contact persons who can coordinate with Caritas Manila and other church and private groups he can tap.

Joel Abano told *NCR* the dialog with Tagle was fruitful.

He listened to our stories and he offered some help. That is more than what we got from the government, the survivor from Tacloban City said.

With the people in suffering

Eslopor, a native of Tacloban, eastern Leyte, has spent most of her 32 years as a nun doing socio-pastoral work. Before joining the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing she was organizing and serving among urban poor people as a professional social worker. Since becoming a nun, she has made the rounds of Benedictine sisters' mission centers in Mindanao, southern Philippines, Samar and Leyte.

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When Haiyan struck, Eslopor was in Ormoc, western Leyte training volunteers for community-based health programs in connection with Council for Health and Development where she serves as board member.

She told *NCR* when the storm surge swept the city, The house of one of my sisters in Tacloban got washed away. My sister was missing for seven days, and my brother-in-law's body with an unrecognizable face was found in a mass grave three days after the typhoon. His ID card was on him.

The number of people killed in the typhoon has reached 6,268, and 1,069 remain missing.

I'm not just People Surge chairperson. I'm also a victim, she added.

However, she acknowledges she is in a better position than most other People Surge members because she is assured of food and shelter.

They are left out in the cold, so when they asked me to be chairperson, I agreed.

Through her network, her group found a place to stay at a dormitory of the Missionaries of Our Lady of La Salette priests in Quezon City. From there they planned their two rallies during their February to April stay in Manila. They talked about their situation at forums, church meetings and during classes, and even with social welfare Secretary Corazon Soliman. Eslopor arranged for survivors to meet with Tagle.

Hungry and lost

For more than one hour on Wednesday, Tagle in a parlor at his residence listened to the survivors talk about distribution of relief goods.

Worms were found crawling out of rice and food handed out to survivors as relief goods by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Eslopor added.

She said local politicians give priority to their own voters and allies in distributing relief goods.

"Our members went from one government official to another to ask for food, help with housing materials, and to ask what the plans are for rebuilding their ravaged communities in Eastern Visayas, southeast of Manila.

"We've been passed around like a basketball. Local officials said there is no aid coming from the national ones. National officials send us to the local government offices, which they said are in charge of distribution of goods. So we came to Manila to bring our demands to the national government," the nun said.

Abano told Tagle his group wants the government to give 40,000 pesos in cash relief for food, transportation and our children's schooling and other everyday expenses, since DSWD cannot seem to distribute the relief goods.

Abano said the amount was computed based on pre-typhoon prices in Tacloban, so while they projected that 40,000 pesos would cover three months of usual expenses, now it could only last for a month because prices have soared.

He said People Surge wants the government to use money given by donors for the survivors.

Tagle agreed a more efficient distribution system is needed.

"Why don't they just give out whole sacks of rice to each family instead of having people line up for small rations every so often?" the cardinal asked.

He also was not clear on the process or system of relief and rehabilitation or the relation between various agencies and positions that have been created, such as the Presidential Assistant for Rehabilitation and Recovery.

"I asked a source in Malacanang, and he admits the working relationship is not very clear," Tagle said.

Tagle offered to find help for emergency relief, especially food, at least while government agencies are not giving certain people aid. Eslopor thanked the cardinal and shared her concern that government will relax its control even more and just let the church and NGOs do the job.

Safe and lasting homes

Shelter is another major concern. A young People Surge member, Jebri Gil, explained to Tagle that their group rejects the government's Reconstruction Assistance On Yolanda program because the framework is geared more towards infrastructure and business, rather than humanitarian development.

People want to rebuild in their homes' former locations, which have been declared 'no build zones' as unsafe places. However, Gil cites reports stating the proposed places for relocation of their community are prone to landslides and flooding.

People Surge members want the government to abandon its reconstruction plan saying it is a mere 'corporate takeover.' They are calling for consultations with survivors on planning reconstruction.

Tagle said people should be moved only into better places than where they are moved from or else they will just return. He shared from his meeting with urban poor groups earlier this year their successful

project of in-city relocation of settlers.

“They worked it out, and they implemented a plan developed with participation of urban poor leaders,” the cardinal said.

Red labeling

Eslopor told Tagle, “We need the church’s support very badly for initiatives of the people because if we do not move nothing will happen.”

She shared with him another problem of red tagging by presidential adviser on reconstruction, Panfilo Lacson.

“How is this action ‘communist?’ We are just asking what is right and finding a way to rise up from this calamity. We are victims,” Eslopor stressed.

She told *NCR* before leaving Manila for Tacloban on Sunday the group’s Manila stint was fruitful even if it did not get what it asked from the government.

“At least we started to organize ourselves as victims, and we will tell our own stories that are opposite the picture that government is trying to show. We are not okay,” Eslopor said.

She said the group will continue its movement in Tacloban.

[N.J. Viehland is an *NCR* correspondent based in the Philippines.]

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