

[EDITORIAL]

Villages that connect

Singaporeans, who can afford it, might favour living in a private retirement village, if the first one now on the drawing board strikes the right note. In a sense, this would represent a turning point for society. Once, elders aged gracefully in the midst of an extended family. Will we now see more active retirees living independently alongside other seniors within purpose-built "villages"? Such social enclaves might appeal to some but seniors should not live in their own world. The community will be

the poorer without their constant presence at and regular participation in community activities.

It is natural, of course, for middle-income baby boomers to downsize their homes for practical and financial reasons. As their options are not ample (with even shoebox apartments costing from \$500,000 in the suburbs to \$1 million in the central area), they might have to move away from neighbourhoods familiar to them and old social ties might weaken. As people form bonds within new-style retirement villages, will insular lifestyles emerge, as seen in

luxury condos in the West catering to affluent seniors?

One might look back with nostalgia to an era when elders were very much a part of the community and played leadership roles in different ways. Respect for the old, bonding with grandparents, dealing with sickness, and coming to terms with death were all mediated via Asian traditions. But changes are to be expected as society is increasingly atomised. A survey of baby boomers in 2009 showed that one in four would not mind living in a retirement village. Nearly 75 per cent said they wanted to live on their own in their golden years.

As there is no turning back the clock, what is important is to find more ways to connect the villages that sprout up. Developers can play a part by designing not just common spaces for residents to socialise but also links with nearby social nodes for wider interaction with the community.

Prepare for the next horror that surely will come

An Asia-wide natural disaster response body and emergency fund may be a good start



Ravi Velloor
Foreign Editor

"Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All."

Thus concludes Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad*.

Written in the early 18th century, the three-book poem follows the progress of the goddess Dulness as her minions bring destruction, decay and bestiality to the land.

Perhaps Dulness was in full cry over the predominantly Catholic Philippines last week. How else but allegory to make sense of the malevolent power that laid waste to several provinces in this South-east Asian nation, and brought looting and violence in its aftermath. At last count, the projected death toll was nudging 5,000.

And yet it is not a surprise. About 250 million people worldwide are affected by natural disasters every year. Developing countries account for 99 per cent of the deaths and 90 per cent of the economic losses, according to estimates by the World Economic Forum in Geneva.

Asia should pay heed because the worst natural disasters of the past 100 years have been mostly in this region, with some exceptions such as the 2010 earthquake that flattened Haiti's capital.

"April," T.S. Eliot famously wrote in *The Waste Land*, "is the cruelest month."

Not in this part of the world, where disasters tend to strike later in the year when the seas are angry and the monsoon waxes and wanes. The 2004 tsunami struck in December, the 2005 Kashmir earthquake that killed 75,000 was in October.

This year, Asia has had two major weather-related catastrophes – the multi-day cloudburst in June over the northern Indian hill state of Uttarakhand that killed more than 5,000 and now, Super Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

What is interesting is that disasters caused by flooding and cyclones have risen dramatically, while others, such as volcanoes and earthquakes, have held fairly steady. Clearly, climate change and environmental degradation are increasingly the cause. What is more, the intensity of these strikes will only grow.

This is why global relief organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) have been boosting their presence in Asia lately.

The pity is that we endure calamities even as science has progressed enough to provide us the means to anticipate a good many of them.

Last month, when Cyclone Phailin hit the Indian coastline along the Bay of Bengal, the country got rare praise because, for once, its disaster management teams had worked efficiently.

District officials persuaded nearly a million people to move far inland, even against their will. The death toll, fewer than 20, was tiny by Indian standards and a far cry from October 1999, when a similar Category 5 cyclone hit the same area. That time, 15,000 perished.

With Haiyan, which swept in at what some say were record speeds, perhaps the most careful arrangements may have been inadequate.

Even so, both preparedness and response could have been better. After all, the Philippines is not unfamiliar with tropical storms, typically receiving as many as 20 during the season.

If nothing else, an unambiguous command and control structure should have been in place long ago. Its absence is palpable. As my colleague Raul Dancel reported from Tacloban, federal and provincial officials are now in a blame game.

How can the Tacloban mayor, with less than 10 per cent of his municipal staff reporting for duty, possibly handle the situation when he is whiplashed by conflicting demands for rescue, relief, burials, rehabilitation and disease control?

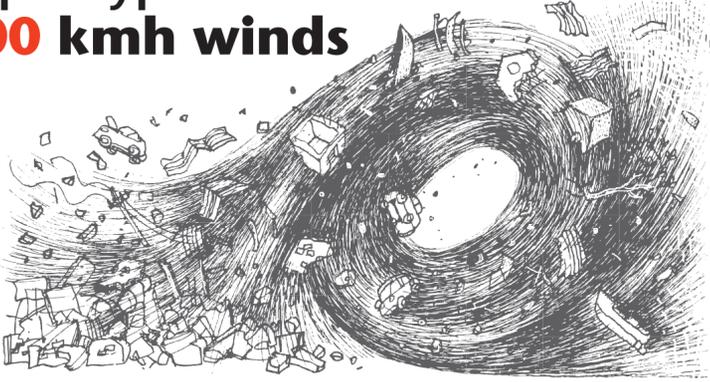
If there was one lesson the world drew from the 2010 Haiti earthquake, it was that crisis situations such as these should be immediately handed to the military. And every relief outfit, rather than trying to make independent assessments of the situation, should be connected to a central command grid.

As of last Friday, a week after the typhoon struck, MSF was still involved in damage assessment and had not been able to put its full complement of 141 doctors and nurses on the ground.

In Haiti, the most efficient relief crews were soldiers of the US 82nd Airborne Division who had precise orders, knew their mission and had the means to accomplish it. This is why Washington's prompt response in sending the US 7th Fleet

[CATASTROPHE HITS HOME FOR ST ARTISTS]

Super Typhoon Yolanda: 300 kmh winds



A typhoon every month

Straits Times artist Prudencio Dengcoy Miel, 50, is from the city of Catbalogan, an area that is hit by a typhoon almost every month. His cousin and a godchild managed to flee to Cebu city before Super Typhoon Yolanda (the local name for Super Typhoon Haiyan) struck Tacloban.

Relief efforts: 0 kmh



No word from friends

Straits Times artist Manny Francisco, 43, was in the city of Cebu when Yolanda struck. He has friends in Tacloban and until now has yet to receive news about their situation there.



to the Philippines last week is an unqualified blessing.

What now? For sure, the Philippines is poised for an overflow of global sympathy. That money must be used well, and the leftover – there is bound to be some – properly audited and saved for the next disaster.

The longer-term after-effects, and trauma, are still to come.

The worst perhaps is the dependency syndrome that follows sudden, large injections of aid. In several coastal communities after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, fishermen were refusing to put out to sea for months because they wanted

the government to replace even boats that could be repaired. Meanwhile, they lived – and drank – off the supplies the world sent them.

The Clinton Foundation, which raised US\$16 million (S\$20 million) for Haiti, correctly focused on building back a nation that taps on its people's energy.

There is also the threat of diseases such as cholera and tetanus that could loom for months. Worryingly, disease patterns can change with huge shocks.

In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands the biting pattern of mosquitoes altered after the tsunami, keeping alive the threat of malaria as

the vector began biting through the day, not just at dawn and dusk.

And then, there are the children, usually the worst sufferers.

To be protected, even at the cost of parent life, is the privilege of every child. But what when father or mother, or both, perish?

The Nicobarese tribes do not have a word for orphan because a parentless child is quickly adopted by the community. Sadly, we are not Nicobarese all.

On a wider scale, perhaps it is time to consider an Asia-wide multi-lateral relief body, with regional centres, that can move quickly.

Charitable giving for emergen-

cies also needs to be a regular process rather than episodic. That way there is a ready bank of aid to tap.

Both are easier said than done, however.

It needs the rawness of tragedy to loosen pockets. And Asia is riven with so many political rivalries and conflicting claims over land and water that many governments are unable to swallow their pride and request help.

But as the disasters come, these attitudes will have to change.

The seas are blue only for tourists. Those who live by the water know another story.