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<th>Communication on nuclear projects in the Philippines.</th>
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Communication On Nuclear Projects In The Philippines

By

Domingo C Abadilla
Communication on Nuclear Projects in the Philippines*
By Domingo C. Abadilla

One morning in the middle of 1976, peaceful residents of the town of Morong in the world-famous province of Bataan woke up to find that a large sign had been scrawled across the wall of their public elementary school building the night before.

The graffiti read, "Fight the Nuclear Poison!"

Unsophisticated though this form of communication might have been in this age of instant newspapers and the ubiquitous radio-TV networks, it was effective. It was sufficient to galvanize the townfolk into action to preserve themselves, their children, and their environment.

But where to begin was the immediate problem. Nobody had told them that a 620-megawatt Westinghouse pressurized water plant was going to be erected in their midst. They had no idea at all what an atomic power plant was. They only heard a bit late in the day that one such plant would rise in their town without prior consultation. Nobody asked them if they desired or needed such a source of electricity. Neither were they aware, of course, of the hazards to life and the environment that such a project posed.

Such was the fate of the people of Morong, most of them subsistence farmers and fishermen, and of the neighboring inhabitants. They were yet to learn the meaning and implications of the "nuclear poison" which the reactor would bring. All they suspected at the time they received the grim warning from the graffiti was that they were going to be obliged to endure certain risks. That these risks would turn out to be so horrible and fatal as to cause cancer, leukemia, and birth defects never entered their simple minds.

The first inkling of what was going to happen so suddenly came when public school teachers were asked to take a census of the population (11,000 at the time). The second clue became evident when roads and bridges began to be constructed linking Morong to Balanga, capital of the province. Actually, the preparation of the plant site was already in progress in February 1976 before word reached some Metro Manila residents not far away.

When the reality that a "monster" was coming to town whether they welcomed it or not finally dawned on them, concerned citizens of Morong went into action. First, they sought information on the "monster." So a group of responsible citizens decided to study it with the help of a chemist friend who lived in a town 140 kilometers away. They read all
available magazines, newspapers, and books containing data on nuclear power plants. As they acquired more understanding of atomic power, they discovered to their dismay that the abundant electricity which the project promised could bring disastrous hazards to their sources of livelihood (sea and land) and their very lives. The more they learned, the stiffer their objection to the reactor became.

When they learned, for instance, about the dangers of thermal pollution to their fishing grounds and radiation from the reactor's normal operations, they began to question the wisdom of setting up such a plant in their community. They asked, "Why would we want a nuclear power plant that could endanger the lives of the people? We lived without electricity before; we would rather do without it than risk our lives and environment."

Then they made a bold decision: "We shall inform others about this." Thus began the process of communication that would involve word-of-mouth and letter campaigns across the oceans, mimeographing and reproductions of pertinent literature that would be distributed surreptitiously to friends as if they were subversive material, resolution, and appeals to the President of the Philippines and the Batasan Pambansa.
(Interim National Assembly), and later, press releases to the media as well as speeches in public forums, and then protest marches and demonstrations as debates sparked by opposition legislators reverberated in parliament.

The campaign to promote public awareness of the hazards of radiation, thermal pollution, earthquake and killer tidal waves was aimed first at neighboring towns in the province. Many groups from various sectors—workers, students, professionals, urban poor, housewives, pastors, priests, and religious studied the issues with the help of the Philippine Movement for Environmental Protection (PMEP). They in turn disseminated information to friends and relatives and joined the people of Bataan opposing the project.

But even more dramatic and touching was the appeal made across the seas for assistance and the response of dedicated individuals from the United States, Europe and Japan. S. Jacob Scherr of the Natural Resources Defense Council (U.S.) dug up information in America about the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant. He and Nicanor Perlas of the Philippine Movement for Environmental Protection generated interest, concern and later support from grass-roots groups and members of the U.S. Congress. Numerous letter-campaigns were mounted and three International
Days of Protest against the export of a Westinghouse nuclear reactor to the Philippines were held in the U.S., Australia, Japan, Canada, West Germany, Spain, France, and Switzerland in 1978 and 1979. Environmental human rights and consumer groups as well as labor unions extended their strong support for the movement.

This was the nature and extent of the concern over the reactor brought about by the information campaign within and outside the Philippines by 1979. There was heart-warming support from both Filipinos and foreign friends who joined forces against what they believed to be an unsafe, oppressive, and expensive reactor. However, there were constraints to the free flow of information experienced during the campaign.

First was the "timid" press during the martial law years from 1972 to 1981 which initially shied away from the brewing controversy. While a few courageous newspapermen reported on protest meetings up to 1978, it was not until martial law was lifted in January, 1981 that fuller discussions in public forums ensued.

The elections for parliament in May 1984 which resulted in a surprise victory of a respectable number of opposition candidates triggered wider ventilation of oppositionist views
on the nuclear reactor. Today the most vigorous objections are being raised by articulate and competent opposition legislators.

A crucial point was reached in June 1979 in the struggle over the reactor. As a result of the March 1979 incident at Three Mile Island, President Marcos ordered the suspension of construction work and investigation of the safety aspects of the plant. In November 1979 the investigating commission concluded that the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant was indeed a "potential hazard to the health and safety of the public." However it found the site safe despite contrary views presented during the five-month hearing.

Opponents of the plant thought at this point that the project had been laid to rest. But this was not to be. In September 1980 President Marcos ordered resumption of construction of the plant whose cost by then had jumped to $2 billion from the original offer of $500 million for two units. This was what happened. Early in 1980 the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission ruled that the safety, health, and environmental review of nuclear plants in the U.S. was not needed in order for it to grant a license to Westinghouse to export a nuclear power reactor to the Philippines.
Accordingly, the NRC granted the export license. This decision was appealed by five U.S. groups before the U.S. Court of Appeals on grounds of health, safety, and environmental dangers posed by the reactor.

At this point, let us consider this interesting testimony of Scherr made before the Coalition for a Nuclear-Free Philippines in Manila on March 21, 1981:

"The NRC and State Department countered that the responsibility of assuring the safety of the plant rested solely with the Philippines. In order to bolster their case, the State Department pushed hard and finally persuaded the Government of the Philippines to submit an amicus brief in the case, to make the argument such a safety review would be an invasion of Filipino sovereignty and a violation of international law."

And so, where does the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant stand today? It is almost fully completed. Originally scheduled to start operations in 1982, it suffered delays which have resulted in huge cost over-runs. Last year the National Power Corporation, the government firm that owns the plant, targetted operations for January this year. Meanwhile, the Philippine Atomic Energy Commission, the government regulatory body that has to issue the license before the plant can begin operating, has not yet done so.

The debate goes on today as to what to do with the reactor as the countdown continues. There are those who say
"go" because of the tremendous cost and effort the project has already entailed. There are those who shout "stop," charge the cost to experience, and convert it to a coal-powered plant that will produce the same commodity, electricity.

Whatever happens, one thing is certain. The information campaign launched by various individuals and groups might not have succeeded in stopping the reactor, but it certainly succeeded in bringing relevant issues to the attention of the Filipino people. It demonstrated that communication between governors and governed is critical in undertakings that intimately affect the public interest if only because, as Jean Rostand wrote, "The obligation to endure gives us the right to know."