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Manila Hostage Tragedy: A Lesson in Crisis Management

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Synopsis

The hostage crisis in Manila took place in Quirino grandstand which commemorates the Philippine democratic struggle, and where elected heads of state take their vow of office, including President Benigno Aquino. The incident reveals the many flaws in the country's security regime and crisis management strategies.

Commentary

Bloodbath in Quirino

ON 23 AUGUST 2010, expelled police officer Rolando Mendoza hijacked a busload of Hong Kong tourists, which ended with the death of nine people, including the hostage-taker himself. Mendoza, a decorated Manila police officer dismissed for his alleged involvement in drug-related crimes and extortion, demanded reappointment in the service. Negotiations led by police enforcers took place but collapsed when the suspect's brother was arrested. Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) operatives were positioned to attack but failed to contain the situation.

As the eleventh-hour standoff concluded, the shocked public was left with unanswered questions and emotional condemnations. With the Philippines already marred by turbulent politics, how can the country move forward from this failure in crisis management? How can it claim back the trust of the international community, especially Hong Kong and China, as bilateral tensions continue to escalate?

Tactical Errors

In a country troubled by crime, insurgency and terrorism, hostage taking is not something uncommon, especially in the south, where Abu Sayyaf has made it their bread and butter to hold civilians to ransom. In fact, Filipino military troops, who have partnered and trained with US Special Forces, are skilled in crisis response tactics. However, the detachment involved in the recent hostage crisis was one that was oddly unprepared, even though the Philippine National Police (PNP) has the elite SWAT and Special Action Force (SAF) units to deal with such cases.

The tragedy placed international spotlight on the competency of the Philippine law enforcement sector to effectively manage crisis situations. In any setting such as what transpired, the top priority is, at all times, to secure the safety of the hostages. What aggravated the outrage of the public are the numerous missed

opportunities of the hostage response team, which might have led to fewer casualties and a more acceptable outcome. However, the lack of professionalism on the part of the police team, the absence of swift counter-measures and the indecisiveness of the leadership – exposed the Philippine law enforcers to strong condemnation from the global audience, who were closely scrutinising the event as it unfolded.

The extensive media coverage earned substantial airtime in local and global networks, which in itself was a tactical error in a highly sensitive situation. As it turned out, it had indeed been a contributing factor to the overall failure of the police response to the crisis. For one, it allowed the Philippine police force and SWAT team to be exposed to an emotional and critical audience. More importantly, the media presence interfered with a delicate operation.

Something that seems to have been forgotten during the negotiations was the need to pay more attention to the psychology of the hostage taker. Typically, lives are greatly at risk at the hands of a depressed and suicidal or cold-blooded individual. What happened in Manila was exactly this. Experts advised that the resolution of a hostage crisis requires the use of every type of communications strategy by a skilled practical psychologist as negotiator or backup negotiator. Most negotiation teams in Philippine hostage situations have been headed by government officials, police officers, politicians, media people or even celebrities. The recommendations of the specialists should have been heeded.

Refocusing on Crisis and Post-crisis Management

The government has to deal with pressures from two fronts – the disgruntled Filipino public and the displeased Hong Kong government.

The post-crisis scenario would serve as a test for an administration that was installed only two months back. All eyes are now on newly-minted President Aquino as the public anticipates reforms in response to the various glitches in the crisis management system. The incident not only underlines the crucial need to upgrade police competency. It also exposes an opportunity to dissect the system of adjudication in the country – which was essentially the grievance of hijacker Mendoza.

Apart from the obligation of the government to placate the citizenry, the hostage incident will test the Aquino administration's capacity to manage the country's diplomatic relations with Hong Kong and China, where the general outcry has been more emotional and possibly turning hostile as well. As people in Hong Kong expressed their utter dismay through various rallies and protests in front of the Philippine consulate, the Hong Kong and Chinese authorities sought a thorough and impartial investigation into the crisis. There are indications that the hostage crisis might undermine relations between Philippines and Hong Kong where many Filipinos work as domestic helpers. The task of the Philippine government is to guarantee the well-being of Filipinos in Hong Kong, even as it promptly contains and manages the diplomatic fallout.

Reforming the Philippine Crisis Response

Members of the political opposition, foremost among them the allies of former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo who is now a congressional representative, quickly seized on the opportunity to use the alleged inefficiency as a bullet against the Aquino leadership. While squabbles in the political arena continue, and as finger-pointing ensues, unproductive politicking must take a backseat and give way to enhancing the capacity of the government to respond to crises.

Before the year ends, the budget for 2011 will be approved. It is hoped that the proposed allocation of US \$209 million for defence will be managed well. As the country is rebuilding its image, investigation must continue at all levels including the police, media and other government agencies involved. This is an opportune time for long-term creative approaches and solutions.

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