

# *After Superstorm Haiyan: Bungkaras, Eastern Samar!*

*A Story of a Samareño*



*Photos courtesy of Atty. Roselle Tenefrancia*



## **Newsflash...**

Supertyphoon Yolanda (international name “Haiyan”). Strongest typhoon in recorded history in the entire planet. To make its first landfall in Eastern Samar, Philippines.

I thought of Llorente, Eastern Samar. My hometown has witnessed typhoons. Strong and ferocious. But somehow the news about Yolanda felt different. It felt ominous, threatening, hostile.

**November 8, 2013.** As Yolanda hammered the Visayas, I was in the office anxiously waiting for the “storm to pass” so I can check in on my 75-year-old parents who were in Llorente. Afternoon passed... nothing. Evening came, and still no word from them. I did not want the night to end as I wasn't sure what news awaits me when I wake up.

## **The morning and days after...**

**November 9, 2013.** It was a Saturday like no other. Tacloban, Leyte was all over the news and it was in a state of enormous devastation wrought by the typhoon. News followed about other parts of Leyte which suffered the same fate. It was heartbreaking to see the damage, the carnage, and the desperate search for missing relatives. But the outpouring of support from the local and international communities was overwhelming - an unprecedented global rescue and relief operations that showed there is truly a rainbow at the end of a storm.

My heart sank again, however, when news about Guiuan, Eastern Samar was finally shown through reports on TV and via Facebook. The town was almost completely destroyed, with a few hundreds of reported casualties. News slowly inched its way up to report on the casualties and damage in the other towns of Eastern Samar - Giporlos, Quinapondan, Balangiga, Hernani, Balangkayan and Borongan. Hernani was severely damaged, with more than 60 reported casualties.



*Map of Eastern Samar*

Balangkayan was also severely damaged, but no casualties. There was, however, a news blackout about Llorente, which is situated between Hernani and Balangkayan. Was it a case of “no news means good news”? An unconfirmed Facebook post came in late Sunday that the town was severely damaged and that a couple of barangays had been washed away.

With communication lines still down and with no way of confirming the state of Llorente after the storm, my brother in Abu Dhabi took the earliest flight out and we, together with other siblings, set on a long journey to check on our parents, families and kababayans. It was a 36-hour trip by land, including a 6-hour delay in Matnog, Sorsogon before crossing to the Samar island by ferry. Frustration was high, not so much because of the long trip, but because truckloads of relief goods and oil tankers were stranded in Matnog and were mysteriously unable to get onto the ferries. We later read in the news that it still



Photo courtesy of Mayor Viscuso de Lira (posted in Rappler by Paterno Esmaguel II)



Photo courtesy: John-John Martin Alde



Photo courtesy: John-John Martin Alde



Photo courtesy: CBCP-Diocese of Borongan

### **Balangiga**

Population: 12,756. Area: 190.05 sq.m. (13 barangays). 14 reported casualties as of Nov. 15, 2013. Town severely damaged.

### **Hernani**

Population: 8,070. Area: 49.42 sq.m. (13 barangays). 67 reported casualties as of Nov. 15, 2013. Town severely damaged.

### **Llorente**

Population: 19,101. Area: 496.07 sq.m. (33 barangays). No casualties, minimal damage.

### **Balangkayan**

Population: 9,046. Area: 207.05 sq.m. (15 barangays). No casualties, but 400 homes destroyed. Mayor lauded for insisting on evacuating residents the night before the storm.

took two days before the trucks were finally able to cross. If not for the media coverage, it probably would have taken longer.

It was pitch dark by the time we arrived in Eastern Samar, with just the car headlights and the moon guiding our way. At 2:00 in the morning, the town of Llorente was so quiet that one could hear a pin drop. We went straight to our house, standing and intact. The joy on our parents' faces upon seeing us was indescribable, something that I will forever treasure. "I am so proud to have children like you," my dad said. What a relief to see that they were all okay.

Thankfully, our beloved town suffered only minimal damage, just the "normal" kind of storm damage. But because of the magnitude of the devastation in the neighboring towns, supplies in Llorente were running out and prices were skyrocketing (sadly, for some, it became an opportunity to make a profit). On a positive note, the Filipino spirit of "bayanihan" was very pronounced more than ever. So many people answered the call to volunteerism, something which I believe is innate in every human being. The Diocese of Borongan and its parishes were quick in disseminating accurate accounts of destruction and in organizing relief efforts. Thanks also to the media, attention was finally drawn to the devastated towns of Eastern Samar. Relief goods slowly started pouring in.

## **Moving forward... "Bungkaras!"**

**November 15, 2013.** Exactly a week after the storm, and it was time to go back and embark on that 30-hour trip again back to Manila. Questions juggled in my head: "As an ordinary citizen, what can I do to help the victims?" "Beyond giving relief goods, how can I be an instrument in rebuilding lives and in reclaiming communities?" I know, deep in my heart, that Eastern Visayas will rise again, probably stronger and mightier than before. "Bungkaras!" In Waray, it means, "to rise again with stronger resolve." The Visayas will recover with renewed optimism.

And most of all, a heartfelt gratitude to God for His mercy for sparing our town from Yolanda's wrath. I probably would not know how to deal with the loss of a loved one in a tragedy like this, or seeing unidentified dead bodies lying around in the streets, or losing a home. Some folks I talked to during my brief visit attributed the "saving miracle" to the geological map of our town, which is above sea level; some in the bay area said they saw a figure similar to our patron saint looking out at sea, and that the big waves "mysteriously broke up in the air" before making a landfall; someone said he saw a dark cloud envelope the town, protecting it from the strong winds and the roaring waves. An elderly was also very grateful for the wisdom of our ancestors for having chosen Llorente as the place to settle in.

In the end, it really does not matter anymore whether the explanation is found in science, in faith, or in fate. What is important is to appreciate the blessings of being alive and of being with loved ones. And as we continue to be grateful for our own blessings, let us remember not just Eastern Samar and Leyte, but also Capiz, Iloilo, Aklan and Palawan and other places which bore the wrath of Yolanda. Let us offer prayers for those who perished, healing for the wounded, and hope for the survivors.

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