



## Raising the Tsunami Alarm in Mabacong

### Charlemagne dela Roca

Barangay Councilor, Barangay DRR Management Council (DRRMC) Vice Chairman and Barangay DRRM Committee Head  
Mabacong, Batangas City

### Indirect Beneficiary

### PHIVOLCS Strategic Planning

When Barangay Mabacong held a tsunami simulation drill in July 2014, a 60-year old woman thought it was for real. Frantic, she looked for her children, tearfully asking among the participants gathered along the National Road. After we explained that it was just a preparedness exercise, we learned that her reaction was borne of her experience in Naujan, Oriental Mindoro, which was hit by a tsunami following an earthquake in 1994.

Contrast this with what used to be the pervasive attitude among most residents, including myself and our Barangay (village) Chairperson Ana Antido, or Pangulong (head) Aye, as we call her: that since no tsunami incident has ever been recorded in Mabacong, because we are sheltered in a cove along Batangas Bay and buffered by nearby Mindoro island, our barangay is safe.

As Pangulong Aye puts it, we cannot deny the increasing and sudden occurrence of calamities and, because of this, we should pay heed to the changes in our climate, be they because of man's neglect or because of nature. I have also come to believe that, given the current state of our changing climate and because we do not know when disaster may strike, we should study, prepare, and plan for the possibility of disaster. As an elected barangay councillor, I take this very important task as a first step towards the safety of all Mabacong residents.

The change in our perspective came about only recently, beginning around the time of the installation of a tsunami warning siren in Mabacong, which was chosen as one of two pilot communities in Batangas to be part of a PHIVOLCS-initiated nationwide Tsunami Early Warning System (TeWS) project. The siren, which was put up in front of the barangay hall in February 2013, can be heard up to a distance of 200 metres. It is to be automatically activated by PHIVOLCS and/or the Batangas City Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (CDRRMO), based on the readings from a wet-and-dry detector/sensor from Lubang Island in Mindoro Oriental.

This siren will be of great assistance to our residents against the threat of possible tsunamis. It will enable our people—especially from our coastal sitios (sites) of Ilaya, Sentro/Poblacion, Ibaba, and Balmes—to know when to evacuate to safety.

Incidentally, in what may be regarded as a blessing in disguise, a technical error occurred in May 2014 which automatically sounded off the tsunami siren for about one hour. This prompted the barangay residents to rush to the barangay hall in alarm. After we had confirmed from PHIVOLCS and CDRRMO that no tsunami was imminent, I apologised to the people in my capacity as the head of Mabacong's DRRM Committee and Vice Chairman of the Barangay DRRM Council (BDRRMC), and explained to them that there had been an error.

Despite being inconvenienced and unduly stressed, the residents took this false alarm seriously enough, realising the possible threat of tsunami and the sorry state of their preparedness. Therefore, when the BDRRMC called for a tsunami drill two months later, we had a big turnout of more than 600 participants—almost 25% of the 2,400-odd Mabacong populace. The drill was very successful, with the Incident Command System tested to ensure an orderly and efficient quasi-emergency evacuation. Aside from the traumatised woman's panic, this exercise was made realistic by some of the residents who brought their important belongings—even animals—during the simulated evacuation. They were given 'awards' afterwards.

Before and after the installation of the siren, the CDRRMO—with the help of PHIVOLCS—conducted seminars for us at the BDRRMC on understanding tsunami warning signals and preparing for and implementing evacuation. I have been echoing this information during smaller barangay-level meetings on disaster, even piggy-backing on regular meetings for the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps), the government's conditional cash transfer program. Widespread information drives have also been going on since 2013. Tsunami warning and information signage and posters, including coastal area risk assessment and hazard maps, have been displayed in strategically located areas and show which sitios could potentially be affected.

Shared information, training, and guidance from the Batangas CDRRMO have also been helpful. CDRRMO Head Rod dela Roca led a meeting with the Mabacong Barangay Council on how to conduct proper emergency drills. Dedicated BDRRMO officers regularly monitor our efforts and coordinate with us. The Barangay Council has passed resolutions approving the Mabacong Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan for 2014-2016. Corresponding budget and procurement plans have also been approved to provide funds for our disaster program and materials. We have already identified disaster evacuation centres and disseminated information to the residents about our disaster evacuation plan. Other neighbouring coastal barangays in Kepko Ilijan and Verde Island have expressed interest in installing similar warning devices.

Based on their feedback and the turnout during disaster preparedness-related activities, I believe that our residents, especially those in the coastal sitios—70% of our population—now have increased awareness and a positively changed perception about the reality of tsunamis and their threat. We plan to conduct regular evacuation drills every two years, and I certainly say that Mabacong is now really eager to be disaster-safe.