

On My Mind
9/16/05

There are lessons in Katrina for all of us. For example, has the CNMI Homeland Security Office reviewed its plans for coping with natural disasters in the CNMI? Or is that even a charge to the Homeland Security Office? How would the Emergency Management Office work with the HSO? Are lines of responsibility clear?</P>

Should Saipan need the supplies stored in one of the pre-positioning ships, have the lines of communication been established for asking for them? Are the Red Cross' supplies all located at its office near the airport? What if one could not get there, for whatever reason? Are there similar supplies somewhere on Capitol Hill?</P>

Saipan has shown it can survive - sort of - massive typhoons. The critical needs are always power, water. Are there enough emergency generators on hand? Do those who need to know, know where they are? Are there plans to make sure water storage tanks are filled as typhoons threaten?</P>

What about the lesser - but still theoretically possible - threats of tsunami or earthquake? Would the Arts Council be ready to accept evacuees, should there be a tsunami, or massive flooding of lower areas of Saipan? Is there any place set aside in As Matuis?</P>

And what about health care? Hospital facilities? There will, in theory, be more space once the new addition is completed, but what about staff? There has been a chronic shortage of medical staff for some time. Should that shortage be allowed to continue, are there any plans in place for enabling it to manage in a time of disaster?</P>

What about Rota and Tinian? Are there emergency generators there? Emergency supplies of food, water, medicines?</P>

Are communication systems checked regularly, emergency vehicles kept fueled? Are government data bases backed up regularly? Are back-up copies routinely placed in safe storage areas?</P>

Disasters the size and scope of Katrina do not happen very often. But that doesn't mean one should not, or cannot, be prepared.</P>

Trained, knowledgeable personnel are, of course, also vital. From this observer's point of view, that does not seem to be significant problem here.</P>

Hopefully the EMO and the HSO have been following the analyses of what went wrong in handling the Katrina disaster, and are taking the lessons to heart.</P>

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I would find fault, however, with the Red Cross' long delayed announcement, made late this past week, that it would be getting involved in fund raising for Katrina victims. I know the Red

Cross had other things on its mind, but it would only have taken a volunteer a couple of hours, at most, it seems to me, to get an announcement out that fund raising for Katrina victims was also underway, or was encouraged, or, at the very least, would be forthcoming. Instead, the local chapter appeared to ignore the larger disaster altogether for almost two weeks.</P>

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And while I do believe in the power of prayer, I find President Bush's belated proclamation that Friday be observed as a national day of "Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims and Survivors of Hurricane Katrina" also long overdue. It reminds me of New York Times op-ed columnist Maureen Dowd's punch line, in her 9/14 column, "A Fatal Curiosity." Wrote Dowd, "The president should stop haunting New Orleans, looking for that bullhorn moment. It's too late." To which I can only say, "Amen."</P>

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On a brighter note, I've been told that at least in certain areas of the Philippine Islands, the locals have gotten tired of waiting for their national government to take a leadership role and provide guidance - in this instance, in preserving and protecting coastal areas - and have taken the matter into their own hands.</P>

Dynamiting fish has been outlawed, as has use of poisons, and strong punitive measures put into place against violators.</P>

Changes in practice, or policy, always do work better when they are initiated by those most affected, rather than coming down from the bureaucracy above. It's a good model, but unfortunately, it doesn't seem to have a lot of support, much less much of an impact, in the CNMI.</P>

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On the subject of changes in practice, there's an on-going attempt on island to change people's practice of dumping all their trash either at the dump, or elsewhere. From now until late in November, the Department of Public Works' Solid Waste Division is conducting a contest among island schools as to which can turn in the most re-cyclables to the Lower Base transfer and re-cycling center. An account of the campaign appeared in this past Thursday's Tribune.</P>

Even tin cans (as opposed to aluminum) and catalogs and magazines are included in the drive, in addition to aluminum cans, cardboard, glass, plastics and newspapers. In fact, the price being offered for aluminum cans has been increased from \$.25 to \$.30 per pound as an incentive to the schools.</P>

Those who bring re-cyclables directly to the transfer station and want to give credit for them to one of the schools should so inform the person at the entrance booth.</P>

The ultimate goal, of course, is to change everyone's practice, throughout the island - to have everyone re-cycle - and to facilitate that by regular residential pick-ups. So far it's been more of a top-down than a bottom-up campaign, but there's no question that all will benefit from the change. Not only will it reduce the need for ever larger public dumps, but it will also reduce the spread of disease as family trash piles - breeding grounds for mosquitos and rodents - are eliminated, and thereby contribute toward a healthier, cleaner island.</P>

It will be interesting to see how long it takes to bring that about.</P>

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The best-written article I've seen in defense of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in the face of efforts by President Bush and his sycophants in Congress to allow well drilling in the sanctuary appeared in this past Thursday's Tribune. It was written by former president Jimmy Carter as a special to the Washington Post. In it Carter wrote, "We cannot drill our way to energy security or lower gasoline prices as long as our nation sits on just 3 percent of world oil reserves yet accounts for 25 percent of all oil consumption."</P>

The article was apparently prompted by a back-door attempt by members of Congress to bury the provision allowing drilling in the reserve in the "reconciliation" decision that combines budgetary directives covering the U.S.' \$2.5 trillion annual budget. Carter describes this as a "tricky ploy to avoid full debate."</P>

He concludes, "The pathway to a better, more sustainable energy future does not wind through the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge."</P>

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Short Takes:</P>

- It was a shock to read of the death of Bruno Dalla Pozza last week. His was such a vibrant presence on island, and for so long! He touched many lives in the process of his varied careers as college music teacher, pianist and piano teacher, tennis player, judo practitioner and teacher, performer and accompanist with his brother Mario....Always so cheerful, energetic, warm, friendly, responsive - it is painful to know that there will be no more chance encounters with the charming person that he was. It hurts, too, that there's been no opportunity to have closure.</P>

- There has, in contrast, been opportunity to have closure in terms of the departure of Japanese Consul Takeo Saito. He himself hosted a "sayonara" event in conjunction with a welcome for the incoming consul, Mr. Kiyoshi Matsukai this past week, in addition to the farewell offered by the governor, also this past week. Consul Saito's departure is a significant loss to the CNMI - he is sociable, knowledgeable, cultured - and became, during his tenure, very well informed about the nature of his "beat." He was active in the local Rotary Club and Chamber of Commerce, and, I'm told, on the tennis courts as well. Incoming Consul Matsukai has his work cut out for him, in following the footsteps of his predecessor!</P>

- The Rotary Club deserves kudos in its own right for sponsoring the Vocational Summit which was held this past week - a rare example, by the way, of a bottom-up approach to resolving a long-term need in the absence of central government support. Let us hope that concrete actions, rather than more words, result from the sessions.</P>

- Last but not least, purists might want to know that the salaries quoted for newly hired doctors at CHC in a Variety article two weeks ago were not quite correct. According to sources at CHC, the doctor claimed to be receiving \$93,000 per annum actually was a Navy physician who only worked a few shifts last year; the \$112,500 annual salary reported as being paid another doctor is correct, and is in fact the same that all doctors in similar positions are

being paid; and the doctor reported as receiving \$156,000 a year will only be at CHC for two months, confirming once again that not all in print is accurate.</P>