

Rio Hondo: Pollution problem is all over

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OFFICIALS were on their way last week to inspect a government housing facility for victims of the 2013 Zamboanga siege when the wooden footbridge they were walking on collapsed. They all fell into the murky water surrounding the houses on stilts built by the National Housing Corporation in Barangay Rio Hondo, Zamboanga City



It was a distressing experience for the officials who had gone there to investigate reports that the houses built by the government for the victims of the siege were made of substandard materials with inferior engineering. Rep. Alfredo Benitez of Negros Occidental was leading the legislative inquiry with Zamboanga City Rep. Celso Lobregat and Mayor Beng Climaco.

They suffered only minor injuries from the collapse of the footbridge but the accident left little doubt in their minds that the houses built for the victims of the Zamboanga siege must have been built of the same inferior materials and with the same incompetence in construction.

Subsequent reports have shown that there was another problem uncovered by the bridge accident. The murky water into which they all fell was so polluted that the smell stuck to their bodies despite considerable washing. Some of the victims had to have medical care as they may have imbibed some of the polluted water.

The Zamboanga accident came at about the same time that Boracay was at the center of national attention – Boracay with its illegally constructed buildings, its overcrowded beaches and facilities of all kinds, and its grossly inadequate sewerage system. Boracay had become a cesspool, to use the word of President Duterte, who has now ordered its closure to all visitors for a six-month period of rehabilitation.

Rio Hondo is a long way south of Boracay but they share the same problem of pollution. Way to the north in Manila Bay, the Pasig River carries all the sewage of the communities along the river and its tributaries. As early as 2008, the Supreme Court, acting on a complaint by citizens, had ordered 13 government agencies led by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to clean up the bay, but it remains polluted as ever. The Rio Hondo accident is just the latest incident that reminds us that pollution is all over the country. It took a great deal of political will to close down Boracay but it has been done. In various degrees the problem exists in many towns and cities and islands of the country. The mayors and governors and other local officials should not wait for the President to step in and act on their own local problems. They should now start doing it themselves.