

Philippines: Fatal game-show stampede—an exploitation of social despair

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The fatal crowd stampede that occurred on February 4 at the entrance to the PhilSports sporting arena in Pasig City, Manila, reveals the poverty and desperation afflicting workers in the Philippines.

The stampede resulted in the loss of 74 lives, with 627 injured. Most of the victims were elderly women who were crushed against a steel gate on the stadium's sloped entrance drive, trampled underfoot, or crushed under other bodies as the crowd surged forward to get a seat in the stadium. One child was killed.

Estimates of the crowd vary between 25,000 and 35,000. The maximum capacity of the stadium, formerly known as ULTRA, was 19,000. For days leading up to the tragedy, a large crowd had amassed outside the arena to gain admittance to the first year anniversary production of the TV game show "Wowowee."

"Wowowee" is famous for its prize giveaways, and is very popular in the Philippines, where it is shown six days a week at midday. For this special anniversary show, prizes included cash of up to P1 million (\$19,230), a car, taxis, and a house with land.

These are huge prizes in a country where 40 percent of the population live on less than \$2 per day. Data from the World Health Organisation give some insight into the poverty and social inequality that afflict millions of Filipinos. According to its latest official data, "in 2003, about 3.97 million families ... were living below the poverty line," in a country where "the annual per capita poverty threshold reached P12 267 (US\$ 220.64) in 2003, up by 7.1 percent compared with the 2000 level of P11 451 (US\$ 205.96)." The World Bank cites 30 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

"Wowowee," produced by ABS-CBN, is pitched toward the most poor and desperate sections of the Philippine populace. According to Agence France-Presse, "Wowowee" host Willie Revillame stated after the stampede that "he had made it a point to stage the game shows at other provincial centers several times during the past year.... We would pick places where the poor are hard-up."

"This is a program that intends to help Filipinos, especially the poor," he claimed. In reality the show is based on the exploitation of the emotional responses of impoverished

people, where chances of winning a prize are miniscule.

The people outside the PhilSports arena on Saturday were drawn from poor communities in Manila and more distant provinces. Susan Doblin told *Reuters*, "We're very poor. I waited for days outside to try our luck. This is a rare chance for us to win a million pesos."

The *Manila Times* quotes Zenaida Campanero, explaining, "We also did not have sleep, many had not slept for days, and with only biscuits to eat and water." A man in his 20s told the *Observer*, "'My mother came here hoping to win a prize,'... holding her dead hand and sobbing."

Such is the level of desperation that police chief Vidal Querol explained, "The dead were lined up on the streets, but people still did not want to go home. It was bizarre. They persisted in entering the PhilSports Arena and demanded that the show go on. Many people were still waiting for tickets although bodies were piling up." According to Querol, even after dead bodies lay strewn on the entrance road, "People stepped over the bodies and continued to make their way into the stadium."

Accounts differ as to how the stampede itself actually developed. Campanero, a survivor, told the *Manila Times*, "As soon as the distribution of tickets for the show began, many started to push themselves to the front." She said there was no systematic queue.

Other witnesses said that the stampede began when a barrier collapsed as people were being let into the stadium, causing the guards to panic and shut the gate whilst the crowd continued to press forward. According to the ABS-CBN's *Interactive* site, Rene Luso, head of security for ABS-CBN, said those at the back of the queue began to push forward after it became apparent that they would be denied access to the arena.

The Department of the Interior and Local Government's (DILG) ULTRA task force, a fact-finding body established immediately after the stampede, submitted a summary of its findings to the Department of Justice. According to the *Manila Times*, the report found that at 4 a.m. the guards at the PhilSports arena had announced that the gate would be opened at 6 a.m., but that not everybody would be allowed entry. Then at 6 a.m., Mel Feliciano, associate producer of "Wowowee," announced that the first 300 people in line would be given tickets which would enable them, if selected, to take part in the

“Pera o Bayong” (cash or basket) portion of the show, giving them the chance to win prizes from P10,000 to P50,000. What transpired next, according to the DILG report, is reported in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*:

“The announcement subsequently incited the people who were outside the official queue ... to push their way into the already jam-packed queue, hoping that they could squeeze in among the first 300...

“At this point, the network’s staff closed the gates, hoping to control the sudden deluge of people wanting to be the ‘first 300’ in line...

“Whether by the pressure exerted on the gate itself or whether the guards finally relented to open the gate again, when the gate was flung open, the crowd surged forward with tremendous speed and force.

“Coupled with the steep decline and the uneven surface of the road in the LRP gate (which is normally used only for vehicular traffic), this eventually caused those in front of the onrushing mob to stumble and fall, [which] culminated in the stampede that caused the majority of the deaths and injuries.”

Vidal Querol commented, “The slope was so steep that when one person stumbled, they fell like dominoes.”

The February 4 tragedy was preventable and even predictable. An article by John J. Fruin, PhD., P.E., titled “The Causes and Prevention of Crowd Disasters,” reads as a severe indictment of those responsible for organizing Saturday’s event. It characterizes a typical “mass craze” like that which occurred as arising when a “competitive rush to obtain some highly valued objective,” such as viewing an event or person, or gaining a privileged seat in a stadium, is elicited through “intensive promot(ion).” Despite the serious dangers associated with large crowds, Fruin asserts, “Most major crowd disasters can be prevented by simple crowd management strategies. The primary crowd management objectives are the avoidance of critical crowd densities and the triggering of rapid group movement.”

This is precisely the opposite of what the “Wowowee” event organizers achieved.

Both ABS-CBN and the Philippine government have attempted to absolve themselves of responsibility for the stampede. The DILG taskforce has criticized ABS-CBN for the lack of coordination between its security guards, PhilSports security, and the local police. In particular, it severely criticized the absence of a worked-out contingency plan for the huge crowd the network expected to attend, and has recommended the Department Of Justice find at least four ABS-CBN executives and organisers legally accountable. The report said that the crowd were “exploited, manipulated and treated like animals.... The decision or act of offering so few tickets to so many people can be likened to throwing a small slice of meat to a hungry pack of wolves and this triggered the stampede.”

ABS-CBN has seized upon this comment, calling for an independent investigation. It claims there are “several

inaccuracies” in the report released by the ULTRA taskforce. Currently under dispute is the responsibility of the local police and Pasig City mayor’s office. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* claims ABS-CBN is offering financial assistance to some victims in return for a waiver against legal action against the network.

By concentrating virtually exclusively on the question of immediate legal responsibility for the stampede, the Philippine government has attempted to obscure its principal, social cause. The recommendations it gave to the department of justice pertain to basic management, safety and emergency response and operational questions and do not once mention the most salient factor—the poverty of those in the crowd, which was the basis for their attendance and extreme anxiety in the lead-up to the stampede.

This event, which so graphically exposes the real social conditions faced by masses of the Philippine population, is a damning indictment of the government and the entire ruling elite. That Philippines’ President Gloria Arroyo is well aware of this is clearly indicated in her public response to the stampede. She called for an acknowledgement of the “compelling circumstances that led to this tragedy” and a commitment to “end despair and raise hope, by joining hands and working together to fight abject poverty.” She acknowledged that “the extent and implications of this tragedy have struck the whole nation,” but described the stampede as a “meaningless tragedy.”

The president’s office assiduously sought to downplay the direct link between the policies of the government and the state of Philippine society made by some political figures and media commentators. Presidential spokesman Ignacio R. Bunye chastised those who “continue to twist the tragedy in Ultra to poison the minds of the people,” before stating that the “continuing strengthening of the peso did not happen by itself. It is fed by good economic fundamentals and confidence in the national leadership.”



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