

On My Mind
9/30/09

Disturbing as it is on one level, the governor's announcement that he intends to invoke his emergency powers in order to "fix" at least some of the problems at the Commonwealth Health Center is, on another level, welcome news. After all, if the CNMI is willing to spend money to have its patients treated by Philippine doctors in the Philippines, what's wrong with having the Philippine doctors treat CNMI patients in the CNMI?

As John Gourley is fond of saying, however, "the devil is in the details." It will be more than a little interesting to see just how the emergency declaration will be worded, exactly what powers it will give the governor, and the extent of the limits, if any, it will define.

Almost equally interesting is the deafening silence from the members of the legislature. The governor has once again usurped their power. The first time it was to extend the CUC emergency declaration beyond Agrekko's departure so that CUC could hire additional guest workers - something the legislature could have done quite easily, simply, by passing a law granting CUC an exemption to the limit on its hiring non-resident workers. Now, because the legislature again failed to act, the governor has again usurped its power.

It is that the governor's lawyers are more creative? or?

Regardless of the merits of the action, people should take heed. One more such usurpation, and the CNMI could well be seen as just as lawless as those infamous South American "banana republics."

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One test of the governor's lawyers will be whether they include provision, in the emergency declaration, for providing what Dr. Cornett, in Tuesday's Saipan Tribune opinion pages, describes as "hammers" - the tools doctors need in order to carry out their function..

It doesn't do any good, as Cornett so rightly points out, to have doctors if they do not have access to the medicines, the blood supply, the dressing and splint material, a more modern CT scanner, that are essential to proper patient diagnosis and treatment.

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Palau has once again taken the lead in marine conservation efforts in Micronesia. In 2005 Palau issued the Micronesia Challenge to effectively conserve 30 percent of near shore marine resources and 20 percent of forest resources by 2020 ; and this past week, Palau again took the lead when it announced the establishment of the world's first shark sanctuary. The Challenge countries - Palau, Federated States of Micronesia and Marshall Islands, and the U.S. territories of Guam and Northern Mariana Islands - represent nearly

5 percent of the marine area of the Pacific Ocean and 7 percent of its coastlines.

Now it has declared the world's first shark sanctuary, covering about 27,000 miles of ocean. Sharks have become increasingly threatened, as both the demand for shark fins - both as soup base and for medicinal purposes - and the efficacy of fishing methods have increased significantly.

Our congratulations to Palau - which, tiny Pacific nation though it is, has unhesitatingly taken on a leadership role in the worldwide issue of marine conservation.

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The power outages accompanying the previous typhoon (Melor has not yet hit as of this writing) highlight the fact that Saipan's power supply is dependent not only on enough generators "on-line" and in operation at the power plant, but also on the system's ability to transmit and distribute that power through cables that, unfortunately, are still hung on power poles instead of having been put underground from the start.

Which brings up the age-old dilemma: who is responsible for cutting down the vines that hang from those lines? Often, it is not the higher-hung power lines, but the lower ones, which carry the cable signal, that are weighed down by the vines, looking like they could bring the power poles down at any minute.

Cable company: are you listening?

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The handling of Typhoon Melor (having not yet done its worst as of this writing) by the administration has revealed a number of contradictions. For example, the closure of the food-stamp office before all food-stamp recipients were able to pick up their food stamps and shop in preparation for the typhoon - as they had been warned to do.

The re-cycling center in Lower Base also closed early despite warning notices to residents to clear up the debris in their yards in preparation for the typhoon.

Admittedly, the needs of the personnel running those operations deserve consideration, but the question of serving the larger good should not be ignored. Not all services are equally critical to helping everyone survive the typhoon. Therefore, not all should be cut off at the same time. It makes sense to close the schools earlier, so that they can be set up as shelters. It does not make sense to cut off the re-cycling center, the food stamp office, quite as early, while residents still need their services in order to protect themselves from the typhoon.

Maybe the administration should re-think its blanket approach to shutting down all functions, offices at the same time?

Then there is the overload to e-mail systems by the huge size of the messages coming from the Emergency Operations Office tracking the storm's progress - which result in leaving this writer's mailbox over-flowing several times a day. Surely there's a way to take off a few thousand characters and still get the message out?

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Due to Typhoon Melor, this column is not only late, but incomplete; it is being released nonetheless in the hope that something is better than nothing? :-)