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Headline: UN: 'Yolanda' tops extreme events of 2013

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MANILA, Philippines—Rather than an act of nature, the devastation of Super Typhoon Yolanda (international name: Haiyan) in central Philippines last year is consistent with "human-induced climate change," according to the Annual Statement on the Status of the Climate of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).

The WMO, the United Nations' authoritative voice on the state and behavior of the Earth's atmosphere, oceans and climate, placed Yolanda at the top of its list of key climate events in 2013.

The WMO report said the extreme weather events of 2013 could not be attributed to naturally occurring phenomena, such as El Niño and La Niña, which are known to cause disasters like droughts and floods around the world.

"Many of the extreme events of 2013 were consistent with what we would expect as a result of human-induced climate change," WMO secretary general Michel Jarraud said in the report released on the organization's website.

"We saw heavier precipitation, more intense heat and more damage from storm surges and coastal flooding as a result of sea level rise—as Typhoon Haiyan so tragically demonstrated in the Philippines," he said.

Strongest on record

"In November, Typhoon Haiyan became one of the strongest storms on record to ever make landfall anywhere on the globe, with maximum 10-minute wind speeds reaching 230 kilometers per hour prior to landfall," the WMO report said.

"Haiyan caused significant damage across Southeast Asia and the Philippines bore the brunt of the devastation. Storm surges of 5 to 6 meters were reported in heavily populated low-lying areas of Tacloban and on the islands of Samar and Leyte," it said.

Based on government records, the typhoon killed 6,268 people, injured 28,689 and displaced more than 16 million. Still missing are 1,061. The total damage has been placed at almost P40 billion.

6th-warmest year

The WMO report said 2013 tied with 2007 as the sixth-warmest year on record, “continuing the long-term global warming trend.”

Globally, there were 94 storms in 2013 (wind speeds equal to or greater than 63 kph), higher than in 2012 (84 storms), 2011 (74 storms) and 2010 (67 storms), it said.

The Western North Pacific Ocean basin recorded a total of 31 storms, above the 1981-2010 average of 26 and well above the most recent decadal average (2001-2010) of 23, making this the most active season since 2004.

Of these storms, 13 strengthened into typhoons, including Yolanda and Typhoon “Usagi” (locally named Odette), which was one of the strongest cyclones globally to have formed in 2013, with 10-minute wind speeds reaching 204 kph.

The WMO said 2013 once again “demonstrated the dramatic impact of droughts, heat waves, floods and tropical cyclones on people and property in all parts of the planet.”

Thirteen of the 14 warmest years on record, it noted, occurred in the 21st century and each of the last three decades was warmer than the previous one, culminating with 2001-2010 as the warmest decade on record.

The average global land and ocean surface temperature in 2013 was 14.5 degrees Celsius—0.50 degree above the 1961-1990 average and 0.03 degree higher than the 2001-2010 average over the decade.

“Temperatures in many parts of the southern hemisphere were especially warm, with Australia having its hottest year on record and Argentina its second hottest,” the WMO said.

“There is no standstill in global warming,” said Jarraud.

Warming to continue

“The warming of our oceans has accelerated and at lower depths. More than 90 percent of the excess energy trapped by greenhouse gases is stored in the oceans. Levels of these greenhouse gases are at record levels, meaning that our atmosphere and oceans will continue to warm for centuries to come. The laws of physics are nonnegotiable,” he said.

Jarraud said governments must continue “strengthening preparedness and early warning systems, and implementing a multihazard approach to disaster risk reduction.”

Other key climate events last year on the WMO list:

- Frigid polar air plummeted into parts of Europe and the southeast United States.
- Angola, Botswana and Namibia were gripped by severe drought.
- Heavy monsoon rains led to severe floods on the India-Nepal border.
- Heavy rains and floods affected northeast China and the eastern Russian Federation.
- Heavy rains and floods affected Sudan and Somalia.
- Major drought hit southern China.

- Northeastern Brazil experienced its worst drought in the past 50 years.
- The widest tornado ever observed struck El Reno, Oklahoma.
- Extreme precipitation led to severe floods in Europe's Alpine region and in Austria, Czech Republic, Germany, Poland and Switzerland.
- Israel, Jordan and Syria were struck by unprecedented snowfall.
- The global oceans reached new record-high sea levels.

The WMO report was released as part of activities marking World Meteorological Day on March 23.

The global temperature assessment is based on three independent data sets maintained by the Met Office Hadley Center and the Climatic Research Unit of the University of East Anglia, both in the United Kingdom; the National Climatic Data Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, based in the United States; and the Goddard Institute for Space Studies operated by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, also in the United States.

Copies of both the summary report and the full report are available on the www.wmo.int website.

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