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Supertyphoon “Yolanda” was one of the most powerful storms ever recorded. There is some debate whether it was in fact the most powerful of all time to hit land, as measured by wind strength. American satellites tracked its winds at 195 mph, with gusts reaching as high as 235 mph; our own Pagasa measured its maximum sustained winds at 171 mph, with gusts recorded at 147 mph. But there is no denying that Yolanda (international code name “Haiyan”) was the strongest storm of the year—and no escaping the conclusion that we should expect more supertyphoons in our future.

The climate, really, is changing. The changes include higher ocean temperatures, and warmer ocean surfaces create stronger typhoons.

There are still a considerable number of climate change deniers, many of whom have found a hospitable home in the anti-science, determinedly isolationist precincts of extreme right American politics. This helps explain why the United States, despite being one of the leading producers of greenhouse gas in the world (its competitor for the title is China, the emerging superpower), has failed to exercise leadership commensurate with its responsibilities at the United Nations-sponsored climate change negotiations.

But at the 19th edition of those talks, currently ongoing in Warsaw, Poland, leadership is a scarce commodity. It’s not just the United States, or China; after the failure at Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2009, the entire climate change conference track was recalibrated. Any real breakthrough can take place only in the Paris conference in 2015—if at all.

To be sure, the process is impossibly complicated. One of the fundamental issues that need to be resolved, for instance, is Gordian in its knottiness. The developed economies have had some 150 years’ head start to get to where they are; developing behemoths like China, India and Brazil have only had a generation or two of rapid development. Why (to phrase the problem from China’s point of view) should a developing economy bear the same burden in stopping climate change as a developed one? If China ends all use of coal immediately (to give one example), then it would not be able to benefit from that cheap (but very dirty) energy source as much as Britain did in the 19th century. Where, the simplified argument goes, is the historical justice in that?

Precisely because of complicated issues like this, the international community resorted to the old trick of kicking the can down the road.

This context of diplomatic pragmatism makes the emotional appeal of the Philippine lead negotiator at the Warsaw talks, Yeb Sano, all the more remarkable. Speaking at the opening session, Sano had everyone’s attention because Yolanda and the devastation it caused were very much in the news.

He thanked the international community for coming to the aid of the Philippines, he spoke about the catastrophe that had just befallen the country—and then he linked the calamity to a greater crisis: climate change.

“To anyone who continues to deny the reality that is climate change, I dare you to get off your ivory tower and away from the comfort of your armchair. I dare you to go to the islands of the Pacific, the islands of the Caribbean and the islands of the Indian Ocean and see the impact of rising sea levels, to the mountainous regions of the Himalayas and the Andes to see communities confronting glacial floods, to the Arctic where communities grapple with the fast dwindling polar ice caps, to the large deltas of the Mekong, the Ganges, the Amazon and the Nile where lives and livelihoods are drowned, to the hills of Central America that confront similar monstrous hurricanes, to the vast savannas of Africa where climate change has likewise become a matter of life and death as food and water become scarce.”

Then he pointed to the brave example of young people protesting the fossil fuel industry, and drew hope and inspiration from their experience.

“We can take drastic action now to ensure that we prevent a future where supertyphoons are a way of life. Because we refuse, as a nation, to accept a future where supertyphoons like Haiyan become a fact of life. We refuse to accept that running away from storms, evacuating our families, suffering the devastation and misery, having to count our dead, become a way of life. We simply refuse to.”

The entire assembly rose to applaud him. Here was leadership—only of the moral kind, true—but real and forward-looking nonetheless.

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