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Headline: What world can learn from Filipinos

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WHEN world leaders gather in Paris today to begin the final stage of negotiations for a binding treaty limiting greenhouse gas emissions, they will draw attention to one of the proven effects of climate change: Extreme weather.

Supertyphoon “Yolanda” (international name: Haiyan) is now the global shorthand for the stronger, more destructive storms a warmer Pacific Ocean generates, even in years without El Niño.

And yet, despite Yolanda’s high death toll, the Philippines also offers lessons in how to survive extreme weather.

In particular, typhoon-prone Albay province is internationally famous for its zero-casualty program. No lives have been lost to natural calamities since 2006; if the tragedy of Typhoon “Reming” (Durian) and its mudslide deaths in 2006 are excepted, the zero record goes all the way back to 1995.

Albay has mastered that difficult operation known as “preemptive evacuation”—residents living in danger zones are evacuated to safety even before the national weather bureau hoists storm signals over the province.

The work of the Albay Public Safety and Emergency Management Office (Apsemo) is crucial; but equally impressive are the residents themselves, who initiate the evacuation when they know a storm is heading their way.

“The residents of Albay, through continuous prodding, have made [preparedness] a part of their system. It is already inculcated in them that when there are anticipated calamities, they should all move,” Apsemo chief Cedric Daep said, during an Inquirer.Net visit to two towns in the danger zone earlier this year.

Early warning systems

Apsemo has provided the village officials of Cawit and Santo Domingo towns with simple early warning systems—an alarm bell, megaphone and rain gauge each—and taught them how to read the amount of rainfall. When a storm is coming, the village officials themselves read the gauge and sound the alarm once it reaches a certain level that calls for evacuation.

“We don’t have to knock on their doors. It is already understood that they will evacuate. [They have] self-discipline because that is their training. They just have to wait for the alarm bell,” Daep said.

Cawit village chief Bibiana Dado said she was proud of how cooperative the town’s residents were.

“Even if there is no go-signal from our mayor, because of the forecast, we village officials make an effort to evacuate the people, to bring them to the evacuation center,” she said. “We don’t want blame for the casualties.”

Buhatan village chief Melva Balea echoed similar sentiments, saying the villagers are well aware that they could die if they were stubborn.

“During typhoons, our village is really not safe. We leave if we have to leave, if our lives are important to us,” she said.

Not uncommon

Throughout Albay, it is not uncommon to hear residents say they don’t want deadly typhoons to happen again.

For Dado, the typhoon that comes to mind is 1987’s Typhoon “Sisang” (Nina).

“There was a lot of [rain]. All our houses were washed out,” she recounted. “I don’t ever want to experience another Sisang here again.”

For Balea, it is 2006’s Reming. She said Buhatan’s residents thought they would be safe on higher ground, away from the coast, but they did not realize how loose the soil would become because of torrential rains.

“Seven died,” Balea said, “because they were trapped in a house made of [concrete].”

Manito Mayor Caesar Daep is proud that his townsfolk have taken to the training very well, especially since they are the ones most affected by floods when typhoons strike.

‘Conscious’

“[Everybody is] conscious of risk reduction and they are like brothers. When one village rings the alarm, others will follow. They are closely knit,” he said.

Santo Domingo Mayor Herbie Aguas, too, is especially thankful his townsfolk are not difficult when it comes to disaster preparedness.

“I’m so lucky in my town that every time I write or give orders during storms ... they really follow. They’re not hard to talk to,” he said.

Even the indigenous people in the area have been trained in disaster safety, in a way that respects local traditions.

“What we do is that our training brochures are in Bicolano so they can understand what they have to do,” Daep said.

In the Philippines, government officials often encounter residents who refuse to evacuate despite repeated warnings of a coming storm.

Worried about their homes and livestock, residents sometimes have to be physically forced to leave areas in the direct path of the typhoon or that are prone to flooding.

In Albay, however, disaster preparedness and a zero-casualty mindset have become an integral part of the people's identity and culture.

### Emergency SOPs

Three days before a typhoon is to hit the Bicol region,

Gov. Joey Salceda conducts the first of emergency meetings with Apsemo and Albay's mayors, vice mayors and municipal disaster risk reduction and management officers to discuss the local government's action plan.

The group holds at least one meeting every day, depending on the strength of the incoming typhoon, as well as additional meetings once the typhoon has weakened.

In these meetings, risk maps are reviewed and food and shelter provisions are accounted for. Salceda and Daep do not surprise their staff with emergency requests, as everyone is already aware of their role in ensuring zero casualty.

"[It is already] defined and identified who are the people responsible for activities during calamities so that ... when you order them to execute their action plan on response, everything is automatic, just like a well-coordinated orchestra," Daep said.

"In one action, everything is accomplished in a few minutes or a few hours," he added.

A minute or a few hours is no hyperbole. Daep holds daily briefings for journalists to make sure no misinformation is spread.

Classes are canceled at all levels even without a drop of rain outside. Albayanos are given a day to buy canned goods, candles and other provisions necessary to survive the coming storm. Whole villages are preemptively evacuated in half a day.

Evacuees also receive incentives in the form of food when they arrive at their designated evacuation centers. The governor's office provides 1.5 kilograms of rice per family, regardless of size, while the mayor's office provides the ulam or viand of the day. Provisions are enough for the evacuees to stay in the centers up to three days.

Apsemo and the provincial government have together orchestrated a well-oiled, efficient disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) machine. What keeps it all running smoothly is Apsemo's extensive information campaign conducted during the other 350 days Albay is spared calamities.

### Education is the answer

Daep said it was extremely important to go down to the village level when communicating to people the importance of disaster preparedness and the basics on climate change.

"The No. 1 problem why people don't understand is lack of information and awareness. So the answer is education," he said.

"In Albay, we started training the potential victims, not much the responders because the responders are there to help and have to wait for victims before they help," he added. "But the

potential victims, if they are trained, that will make the job of the local authorities easier because even without intervention they can act on their own to save themselves.”

On average, Apsemo tries to hold three sessions per village, making sure that not only the village council is trained but also members of the community who can facilitate preemptive evacuation without waiting for local authorities or first aid responders to help.

Apsemo also closely coordinates with the provincial government and nongovernment organizations to involve more people in the participative campaign.

Cawit was one of the first villages to be trained in preemptive evacuation. Today, coastal villages have also been trained for tsunamis, as well as earthquakes.

Buhatan village in Santo Domingo town, Albay, represented the Philippines in the 2006 Exercise Pacific Wave, a worldwide tsunami drill facilitated by the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology. Two dozen countries on the Pacific Rim also took part in the drill.

These systems were put in place by Apsemo, which Daep proudly described as a unique entity. It was the first independent DRRM office in Asia, and a precedent to Republic Act No. 10121, or the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act, which created the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC).

Apsemo's efforts in systematizing DRRM have earned local and international recognition, such as the 1999 best Asian model of disaster management award from Asian Disaster Management Center, the 2008 Galing Pook Award from the Department of the Interior and Local Government, and hall of fame status for winning the NDRRMCs Gawad Kalasang Award three years in a row (2009 to 2011), as well as recognition from the United Nations as a global role model.

Daep is also a regular at various conferences abroad to share the reduction and preparedness measures Albay has put in place. Countries have also sent representatives to the province to train at Climate Change Academy, the only school in the world dedicated to DRRM and climate change adaptation.

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(Editor's Note: The Inquirer Group is covering the historic climate change conference in Paris, which starts today (Monday, November 30, 2015). This special report, which can be read in full and in multimedia format at [inquirer.net/climatechange](http://inquirer.net/climatechange), is part of the Inquirer Group's Pinas to Paris campaign.)