

Headline: Post-‘Yolanda’

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The past week was devoted to a remembering of the tempest called “Yolanda,” which ended and upended thousands of lives in Eastern Visayas and elsewhere three years ago, and rearranged not only the physical landscape but also many people’s cavalier view of the effects of climate change.

There had never been anything like Yolanda. The Joint Typhoon Warning Center in Hawaii cited its sustained 314-kilometers-per-hour winds, making it the strongest typhoon to ever make landfall anywhere. Horrific storm surges tore through the terrain and corpses littered the streets for days, weeks, afterwards. Was there any way to prepare for such a fearsome show of natural fury? The body count of over 6,000 remains staggering.

“I thought it was the end of the world,” the Inquirer’s Michael Lim Ubac, writing on Yolanda’s aftermath in a 5-part series, quoted a survivor as saying. “Bureaucratic inertia and apathy coupled with misplaced priorities of the government—at the local and the national levels—became a combustible mix that exploded” when Yolanda barreled in on Nov. 8, 2013, Ubac wrote. Climate legislation had been in place after the earlier tumultuous passage of Tropical Storm “Ondoy” and Typhoon “Pepeng.” But the government, for one reason or another, was sluggish in responding to Yolanda, taking a week to reestablish itself in Tacloban City, Ground Zero of the catastrophe.

Particularly sluggish was the Aquino administration’s response to the housing crisis. For example, the National Housing Authority was supposed to build over 4,000 units in Concepcion, Iloilo, but none has been completed up to now. Many people’s lives are still on hold three years after the fact. Sen. Loren Legarda has wondered why the past administration failed to use P20.7 billion for housing assistance to Yolanda victims in 2016, and expressed hope that the construction of permanent housing could be fast-tracked.

That things were and will never be the same again after Yolanda is quite clear. Yet it offered valuable lessons in survival and resilience, which the public sector continues to institutionalize, and the private sector has taken to heart, to help save lives in succeeding catastrophic storms.

The Board of Investments recently approved P76 billion in investments aimed at fast-tracking rehabilitation and redevelopment projects. Notable among these are the 12 renewable-energy projects which, according to Trade Undersecretary Ceferini Rodolfo, are crucial in stabilizing the stricken areas, and “aligned with the government’s strategy to move into the medium- to long-term recovery and rehabilitation of areas highly affected by calamities.”

President Duterte, in Tacloban for the commemoration of Yolanda’s third anniversary, ordered officials to complete the new shelters for the homeless survivors by December. “I must admit that the government has fallen short, very short, of the expectations of the people,” the President was reported as saying. He added that the rehabilitation projects “should all have been completed one year after” Yolanda.

A result of the Yolanda experience, Ubac wrote, is that the Philippine government has become a champion for fighting climate change: “Overnight, Filipino officials metamorphosed into champions for climate action, joining world leaders at the 2015 Paris climate change summit in clamoring for an end to carbon emissions.” Indeed, the Philippines, as a country most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, is making sure that it would not again be caught as flat-footed as when Yolanda hit.

The bottom line is this: The Philippines' post-Yolanda phase is a continuing rehabilitation, spanning administrations, shepherded by good intentions, intelligent planning, and a hopefully appropriate budget, even if occasionally stymied by bureaucratic red tape. But first: Let's ratify the Paris Agreement.

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