

Headline: 'An issue of existence'

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The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued last week its latest report on the state of the world's climate, and the findings could not be more unequivocal: Global warming is getting perilously close to the tipping point, with already devastating weather disturbances becoming even more frequent and severe.

Described by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres as a "code red for humanity," the landmark "Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis" report—written by 234 scientists from 66 countries and drawn from more than 14,000 studies across disciplines—paints a bleak future for the planet.

It concludes that due to the emission of greenhouse gases caused by human activity, the globe has warmed by 1.1 degrees Celsius since the pre-industrial age, unleashing devastating weather events from prolonged droughts to wildfires, heatwaves, floods, and more powerful typhoons and hurricanes. By the end of the century, extreme sea level events that had occurred only once every one hundred years could strike every single year in certain areas. Exacerbating these natural disasters are the weak actions of governments to halt or slow down climate change.

"The scale of recent changes across the climate system as a whole and the present state of many aspects of the climate system are unprecedented over many centuries to many thousands of years," said the IPCC report. "Human-induced climate change is already affecting many weather and climate extremes in every region across the globe. Evidence of observed changes in extremes... and, in particular, their attribution to human influence, has strengthened."

Unless deep, rapid, and large-scale concerted actions are taken to reduce greenhouse gas emissions—mainly carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels—the average global temperature will further warm and reach or even exceed the 1.5 degrees Celsius threshold within just the next 20 years, the report stressed.

Declared Guterres: "The alarm bells are deafening and the evidence is irrefutable: Greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk."

The temperature rise of 1.5 degrees Celsius is the internationally agreed-upon maximum level that humanity can cope with, even if it means longer warm seasons and shorter cold seasons. If the world fails to keep the warming rise to that level—the universal target under the Paris Agreement—a "climate catastrophe" is almost guaranteed. People in certain parts of the world could just die from going outside their homes.

No country will be spared from the devastating impact of these extreme weather events. But the impact will be more profound on Asia-Pacific, home to 60 percent of the world's population and also the world's most disaster-prone region, which the Red Cross said saw a record number of climate-related emergencies in 2020.

Projected to be particularly hard hit are countries highly exposed to extreme weather disturbances, such as the Philippines. The country ranks fourth on the World Climate Change Risk Index, and is estimated to have lost around \$3 billion from 2010 to 2019 due to over 300 events tied to the climate crisis, according to the World Wide Fund for Nature-Philippines.

“For a vulnerable country such as the Philippines, as the temperature needle moves towards 1.5°C, we will experience increasing dangers to our people and our ecosystems,” warned WWF-Philippines Executive Director Katherine Custodio.

Already, sea levels in the Philippines may be rising much faster than in other parts of the world, according to meteorologist and climatologist Lourdes Tibig: “I can cite one particular island in the Visayas where the sea level rise is four times the global average,” she said in a TV interview. “Imagine what that coastal island would look like in 2050. It would be submerged almost the whole year...”

Environmental advocates note, however, that even with accelerating climate change, not enough decisive action is being done to address the crisis. Coal power plants remain a pillar of the Philippine energy system, for instance, and the pursuit of ill-advised massive reclamation projects by public and private entities go on unhampered.

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“Our governments are too slow in responding,” lamented Lidy Nacpil, coordinator of the Asian Peoples’ Movement on Debt and Development, an alliance representing more than 50 groups in Asia campaigning on climate change and other issues.

The Philippines may be in the grip of a combined public health and economic crisis, but the government needs to be roused to more urgent action to prepare for the far bigger climate catastrophe ahead. The stakes are stark, said Tibig: “For the Philippines, it becomes an issue of existence.”