

Headline: The floods next time

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On top of the Big One — a major earthquake that scientists warn could hit Metro Manila and cause extensive death and devastation due to movement in the West Valley Fault — the Asian Development Bank is forecasting that four cities in the metro, along with three other major cities in the country, are particularly vulnerable to another kind of disaster: flooding.

That news may not bring shudders the way prospects of an earthquake do. Manila, after all, floods every time a torrential downpour happens. And people have long learned to shrug off the danger and inconvenience arising from this perennial problem, as well as the plain government ineptitude to do something about it.

But the ADB warning is not about the ordinary flooding endured by the metro due to seasonal rains. Its new joint report with the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research titled “A Region at Risk: The Human Dimensions of Climate Change in Asia and the Pacific” identifies the cities of Caloocan, Malabon, Manila and Taguig, as well as Butuan, Davao and Iloilo, as most in danger of being exposed to rising sea waters because of climate change. A one-meter rise in sea level means that “coastal and low-lying areas in the region will be at an increased risk of flooding,” said the report.

The warmer planet will occasion more powerful typhoons and natural disasters, a phenomenon of which the Philippines has had a unique and early frontline experience with the likes of Typhoon “Yolanda” (2013) and Tropical Storm “Ondoy” (2009), two of the most destructive storms on record. But those howlers are apparently only a prelude, as scientists predict bigger and more frequent storms to come, with greater projected damage to lives and property. “Losses from tropical cyclones in Asia and the Pacific by 2085 include a 17-58 percent increase in direct housing damage in the Philippines if no adaptive measures are taken,” warned the ADB.

An earlier ADB study, in 2012, already raised the alarm on the Philippines’ susceptibility to flooding. The country is said to be among the top five countries in Southeast Asia with populations at greatest risk—6.81 million Filipinos vulnerable to coastal flooding, and 3.71 million Filipinos vulnerable to inland flooding. They form part of the roughly 750 million people in Asian cities that would be at risk as well to such developments by 2025, when Asia is projected to have 21 of 37 megacities worldwide, with their attendant problems of human density, inadequate infrastructure and environmental stresses.

Of these Asian cities, Bangkok, Dhaka, Guangzhou, Ho Chi Minh, Kolkata, Manila, Mumbai, Shanghai and Yangon “are all highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, floods, and other impacts of climate change,” according to the ADB’s Climate Change and Disaster Risk Management Unit in 2015. To mitigate this scenario, the institution said “cities need to become part of the climate change solution. Asia’s cities already consume 80 percent of the region’s energy and create 75 percent of its carbon emissions. Asian cities are poised to contribute more than half the rise in global greenhouse gas emissions over the next 20 years if no action is taken.”

In addition, “making cities resilient also means making them less energy-intensive through more and better public transport, energy-efficient buildings, and greater use of renewable energy.”

In the case of the Philippines, are any significant measures along this line being undertaken by the government to address the looming troubles? Public transport, for one, remains a mess one year

into President Duterte's administration, contributing to the daily hell that commuters endure, especially when rains come and the metro practically grinds to a watery halt. But the city floods that people have learned to stoically live with are harbingers of more frightening things to come — unless urgent measures for change and disaster management are begun now.

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