

Headline: Relentless surge

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Senator Ramon “Bong” Revilla Jr. scoffs at charges that he diverted his pork barrel 22 times to bogus nongovernment organizations. But spot reports and evening newscasts on scandal can smudge the significant.

Take the overlooked BBC report on the Pine Island Glacier in Antarctica. About two-thirds the size of Britain, it is “probably in a headlong, self-sustaining retreat,” fret British, French and Chinese scientists. The meltdown will spill worldwide. It would also dunk the Philippines.

Sea levels here surged, on average, four times the global rate, notes World Meteorological Organization’s Michel Jarraud. Sea levels are not uniform worldwide. Atmospheric pressure and currents play a role. So does land subsidence caused by excessive pumping from underground reservoirs, as in Metro Manila and Cebu.

“Think of (the Pine Island Glacier) like a ball,” British Antarctic Survey’s Hilmar Gudmundsson told Nature Climate Change journal. “It’s been kicked. It will keep rolling (into) the foreseeable future.”

The glacier sprawls over a quarter of all ice flowing off West Antarctica. Satellites recorded a marked thinning of ice. “The grounding line—the zone where the glacier enters the sea, then lifts up and floats—has reversed tens of kilometers.”

This produces what scientists call “marine ice sheet instability,” BBC’s science correspondent Jonathan Amos reports. “(This) inherently unstable architecture, once knocked, can go into irreversible decline.” Today, the skid appears to be “self-sustaining.”

These computer simulations match closely satellite observations of continued retreat, says Dr. Andy Shepherd of Leeds University. “They provide compelling evidence that increased ice losses are inevitable in the future.”

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says it is “more likely than not” that storms will increase in intensity in the coming century. IPCC estimates the coming century could usher in sea level rises of between 26 centimeters and 62 centimeters.

In 23 East Asian cities, 12 million are at risk of severe flooding from rising sea levels, the Asian Development Bank estimates. That’d put at risk roughly \$864 billion in assets exposed “to a 1-in-100-year flood.” Less than 0.3 percent of annual GDP could protect the most vulnerable sectors: infrastructure, coastal zones and agriculture.

Some smaller islands here could be swamped, if rising sea levels exceed global average by 10 to 15 percent. Dr. Rodel D. Lasco of IPCC fears. Our coastline, stretches 18,000 kilometers and is vulnerable to sea level rise. The country ranks fourth in the Global Climate Risk Index. Fifteen of the 16 regions of the Philippines are vulnerable.

Mindanao can no longer regard itself as a typhoon-free region, Philippine climatologists say. Flash floods from Tropical Storm “Sendong” (international name: “Washi”) killed over 700 people in the western coast of Mindanao in December 2011; Typhoon “Pablo” (international name: “Bopha”) tore

into Davao Oriental province killing about 600 and leaving thousands homeless.

“Before, (storms) almost never reached Cebu, and definitely not Davao. Now, they do,” said Jose Maria Lorenzo Tan, president of World Wildlife Fund Philippines. “Climate change manifests itself in clusters or pockets of risk. Responses can and should be crafted at a variety of scales: catchment, city, site and building. This will define the scope of future opportunity. Everyone can be part of the solution.”

In 2009, Congress approved the Climate Change Act. Signed into law by President Gloria Arroyo in the twilight of a scandal-plagued administration, Republic Act No. 9729 established a Climate Change Commission. It is to coordinate, monitor and evaluate the programs and action plans relative to climate change response and adaptation.

Budgetary allocations to address problems resulting from storm surges, coastal erosion, flooding, and inundation resulting from sea-level rise have been increasing at an average of 26 percent, Budget Secretary Florencio “Butch” Abad notes.

Sure. But far more needs to be done, says the World Bank in its Philippine study: “Getting A Grip on Climate Change.” “The poor are the most severely affected.” And less affluent countries are confronted by the threat that their “hard-earned development could be reversed in a short time.”

The national calamity fund has indeed been jacked up. But “most of the resources have been directed at response, recovery and rehabilitation. Disaster prevention has been sidelined.” The calamity fund can support disaster prevention activities, but has rarely done so. And the planning and prioritization process “could be strengthened by the use of improved decision-making support tools.”

That’s a polite way of saying we’ve yet to get our act fully together. Most departments and local governments do not make use of already available tools to stitch “climate activities into budgets or integrate climate risk factors in infrastructure.”

President Aquino made it clear, from the start of his presidency, he won’t seek a second term. In the remaining years, the way forward can be a three-pronged thrust: (a) “Implement the remaining pieces of the core climate change reforms; (b) buttress that with “local level policy and institutional reforms;” and (c) build capacity to manage change.

The Department of Finance, for example, “has a powerful infrastructure to mobilize domestic and international resources. (That) includes leveraging private sector resources”—which need to be coordinated.

“Convene the Climate Change Commission, National Economic and Development Authority, and the budget and finance departments to lead by example.” That’s a diplomatic way to ask—who else?—the President to bang heads.

As Revilla and company wail and gnash their teeth, sea levels, fed by the “Pine Island Glacier” meltdown, surge relentlessly.

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