Headline: Multiple red flags

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Is the 10-percent slump in Vice President Jejomar Binay's poll ratings the beginning of a free fall? Good question, as Commission on Audit data shovel up more data on embedded graft.

But this can smudge equally compelling issues. Today, over 6.2 million Filipinos are at risk from severe flooding, says Climate Central's new analysis. It tracks surging sea levels and flood risk based on new worldwide data.

Publication came when the Philippines finished the casualty cum damage reports inflicted by Tropical Storm "Mario" (international name: Fung-Wong). Twelve died, 14 injured and two were missing, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council tallies show. Evacuees crested at 63,254, and the damage bill came to P389.1 million.

Historically, the strongest typhoons come lashing in the last three "ber" months: October, November and December. Since the 1990s, they've been increasingly stronger. Typhoon "Neneng" (international name: "Phanfone") entered the Philippine area of responsibility Friday but will probably skid northward.

This will not be the last storm. Increasingly severe storms threaten as climate change cuts across Asia, write Gregor Aisch, David Leonhardt and Kevin Quealy. One out of four Vietnamese cluster in areas "likely to be subject to regular floods by the end of this century." Four percent of China's residents—50 million people—live in the same kind of areas.

Globally, eight of the 10 large countries most at risk are in Asia. About one person in 40 will be locked into places likely to be swamped, if today's climate patterns persist. Data indicate that 2014 could be the hottest year since 2010. No one guarantees that the temperature will dip soon.

"Filipinos bear a disproportionate amount of the burden when it comes to climate change," President Aquino told the recent United Nations Climate Summit. He cited the battering inflicted by Supertyphoon "Yolanda," saying: "Nations should not wait for another's action before determining its own."

"We are dangerously close to condemning the next generation to a future that is beyond our capacity to repair," US President Barack Obama told the same forum. "In each of our countries, there will be interests resistant to action… But we have to lead…"

Rising sea levels could uproot 13.6 million Filipinos by 2050, the Asian Development Bank projected in an earlier study, "Addressing Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific." Three typhoons in as many years lashed Mindanao, which used to reel from a wayward storm every 17 years or so.

In "Environmental Science for Social Change," Dr. Wendy Clavano identifies the "high-risk" provinces. These flank Lingayen Gulf, Camotes Sea, Guimaras Strait, waters along Sibuyan and central Sulu, plus bays in Iligan, Lamon and Bislig. The chances of Manila flooding yearly have risen to 65 percent, and Davao's to 90 percent.

“Global climate is changing faster than our politics,” wrote Matt Malone, SJ. Many of the UN Climate Summit protesters came from other nations. In politics, we used to call that kind of momentum “the Big Mo”—the invisible, unquantifiable, powerful force created by a succession of wins or other events that break your way.

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was the first international gathering of leaders to discuss climate change. It seemed then that two or three negotiations more, the outcome would be a binding treaty to strictly curb carbon emissions. It did not come to pass.

China has since overtaken America as the biggest emitter of carbon dioxide. Russia’s economy hinges on extraction of fossil fuels. “Concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere today is 42 percent greater than before the Industrial Revolution,” the World Meteorological Organization estimates. Red flags are multiplying.

In the Philippines, coping with climate change rests on local government units. We have 81 provinces, 144 cities, 1,490 towns and 42,028 barangays. How many have crafted action plans to cope with the inevitable havoc from altered weather ahead?

The province of Albay is an exception. As a “first line of defense,” the Center for Initiatives on Research and Climate Action drew up land use plans, zoning and risk mapping. These redirected business and over 10,000 households toward safer locations.

Social preparations range from training (as in evacuation) to use of the local media for programs on climate change. There are ambulances, rubber boats, passenger trucks, helicopters, and fire trucks that can evacuate 160,000 people per day if needed.

Albay’s program targets preemptive evacuation—its key response mechanism to achieve its zero-casualty goal. Protocols for evacuation are well-established, and a ready budget for calamities is maintained. These have tamped down its casualty list to zero for 16 years now. Two national laws—the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010 and the Climate Change Act of 2009—were enacted based on the Albay model.

Another exception is the third-class town of San Francisco in Camotes Island off Cebu. Led by then Mayor Alfredo Arquillano Jr., the townsfolk devised a local system in reducing and confronting disasters, but also in facilitating efficient delivery of basic services. Each barangay has a hazard map and action plan.

The system enabled town officials to track Yolanda before it hit and to evacuate people in a swift, orderly manner—with zero casualty. It has since become a world model for disaster preparedness.

Where do the other LGUs stand? Many focus on wangling slabs of the Internal Revenue Allotment fund—for basketball courts, waiting sheds and, in some cases, larger allowances for themselves.

Many have disaster response programs—on paper. It guarantees that their officials will be among the refugees when—not if—the next storm hits.