Headline: Climate change kills the poor first

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Without much attention from those not directly affected, tropical depression Agaton kills over 40 in Mindanao. And because the storm that has been bringing heavy rains hardly moves and has not yet exited, it can cause more deaths. I wrote last week that 2014 will not be a walk in the park, and Agaton is a precursor of things to come.

Climate change kills. A country with so many coastal areas will bear the brunt of rising water levels. Areas by the seashores will be inundated even without typhoons. These calamities will force Philippine society to confront a touchy issue. It is less about climate change killing people but that it unavoidably kills the poor first. Whether climate change will express itself through typhoons, floods, or landslides, the poor are most vulnerable and the first victims.

If the heavy rains persist in Leyte and Samar, even if there is no storm but only a low pressure area, lives of those who survived Yolanda will suffer from their temporary shelter, and some will die from floods or illnesses. This time, though, almost all new victims will only be the poor, or the poorest among them.

Again and again, I have written about the way the poor people die in the Philippines. Where they choose to live basically determines what kind of calamity will kill them. For those who live by the sea shores of a country with the 4th or 5th longest coastline in the world, Yolanda and similar typhoons kill them. For those who live by river banks, drainages, canals and other waterways, floods kill them. Remember Ormoc in 1991? The floods spawned by a typhoon killed 4,000 people and another 2,000 went missing forever. And those who live along the slopes, or have these hills behind them, are buried by landslides, as had happened to St. Bernard of Southern Leyte.

Now, where else can our poor stay? They are human beings, not fish, so they need to stay on land. What land is available to the landless when it is illegal for them to stay where they are not owners or lessors? Landlessness and squatter-hood (the politically acceptable term, they say, is "informal settlers") are inherited in the Philippines, not a consequence of ignorance, not a penalty for laziness, not a punishment for failure. By default, then, the poor stay in lands that the rich, the powerful and non-poor do not want – maybe because these lands are ugly, unproductive and dangerous.

Of course, in the rural areas, the poor have been traditionally called the "landless." In the cities, though, till recently, they had been called "squatters." As squatters, the dangers for the poor are quite different from their counterparts in rural areas. Most squatters are densely packed in areas that themselves are in tight places. The most feared killer of squatters is fire which can swallow crowded shanties in a matter of minutes. Common killers, though, are various illnesses, epidemics, and violence.

The squatters learn to live with all sorts of syndicates – those who rent out land they do not own, who sell water they do not own, those who connect electricity they also stole, and, of course, syndicates that deal with drugs and other forms of criminality. Aside from natural calamities, the urban poor also have man-made disasters to contend with.

History has been unkind to most Filipinos. Spain made them legally landless and forced their descent to poverty. The United States, after taking over Spain as our new colonial master, preferred

to affirm the land title system of Spain instead of returning the land to Filipinos. Worst of all have been Filipino governments from 1946 who inherited lands they called "public" which neither Spain or America paid for. Filipinos who became the new governors of the Philippines forgot their history. Their historical amnesia has perpetuated the greatest crime inflicted to Filipinos – their degradation as dignified human beings to landless wanderers in their own motherland.

By allowing poverty to make the poor helpless, government is forced to take care of them. By their sheer number, the poor and the very poor can comprise the majority of the population, too many to disregard. But their being poor diminishes their importance greatly. While the politicians can proclaim that all are equal under the law, we all know that is not so. And while the rich and the highly educated can say that, under divine law, the poor are equal to all in worth and dignity, we all know again that this is not true.

That is why the poor are considered a problem, not an asset, by government or the private sector. A problem has to be eliminated, or solved so it will not bother the non-poor. An asset will deserve investments, but not a problem – unless the problem threatens the safety or convenience of the non-poor. That is why those who feel devalued choose to fight and try to kill as well, whether they are communists or separatists, to gain some value.

The horrible destruction caused by Typhoons Sendong, Pablo and Yolanda may have served a curious purpose. By killing thousands of the poor, government today is committing to build at least 60,000 houses for them. That means 60,000 families will not be squatters anymore, will not be homeless anymore. It is my deepest wish that the government will continue to provide land and decent homes to more and more of the poor – even without typhoons, even on the pretext of rescuing more families from the jaws of death.

Let it turn out to be that the many thousands who had been offered as sacrificial lambs in the altar of death from calamities may have opened many more eyes, touched more hearts, among those who govern. It may yet happen that mother nature will reverse what colonialism and historical amnesia established and perpetuated. When our poor regain stewardship of the land of their ancestors, a new nation will rise.