

Headline: Double whammy

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The Philippines was hit by a double whammy a few days ago.

One was the report by the World Bank saying that the Philippines is at increasing risk of massive storms due to climate change and global warming, as South Asia and Southeast Asia are projected to “heat up” in the next few years. The report projected that typhoons will increase in intensity to Category 4 and 5, with the cities of Bangkok, Ho Chi Minh, Jakarta, Manila and Yangon among those likely to be most affected, the devastation particularly severe in the coastal areas.

“If the world warms by two degrees Celsius, it will cause widespread food shortages, unprecedented heat-waves, and more intense cyclones. In the near-term, climate change, which is already unfolding, could greatly harm the lives and the hopes of individuals and families who have had little hand in raising the Earth’s temperature,” warned the report.

The second piece of bad news didn’t have the same apocalyptic ring, but it was troubling nonetheless in light of the WB report. Nathaniel Servando, the administrator of the weather bureau Pagasa, confirmed in a text message to officer-in-charge Vicente Malano that he has resigned his post after serving the agency for 23 years. Servando, 48, had been on leave from his job for health reasons, but last Thursday he formalized his absence by availing himself of optional retirement. He is said to have accepted a teaching post in Qatar with a salary vastly higher than the gross monthly pay of P68,428 plus P2,000 cost-of-living allowance that he received at Pagasa.

And so it goes on—the continuing flight of the Philippines’ best scientific minds for better opportunities abroad, even as it faces overwhelming developmental problems that require their expertise—from deforestation and the loss of natural resources to flooding, urban sprawl, the lack of public health and the meager state of technological and social safeguards against natural disasters.

Can one fault Servando for leaving? His children are said to be in college; his wife is a teacher by profession but runs a sari-sari store in their house. Unconfirmed reports said Servando was lured to work in the Middle East with a promised salary of P600,000. “If you get an offer for that kind of pay, perhaps you would bite, too,” said Malano. “Even our doctors are taking nursing courses to go abroad. They sacrifice being doctors to become nurses.”

According to the Philippine Weathermen Employees Association (PWEA), more than 20 forecasters and employees in other divisions of Pagasa have left for better-paying jobs overseas in the last 10 years. President Aquino finesses that number by saying that only five have left the agency since year 2000, and only three under his watch. In any case, he said, there is no cause for worry because Pagasa has just hired 37 new meteorologists and more are expected.

The President misses the point. The likes of Servando, with his 23-year experience in the field (he was a weather specialist for 10 years, then chief of the weather forecasting division and later deputy administrator for research and development of Pagasa), are a valuable resource that new graduates and trainees would be hard put to match. Also, mere personnel replenishment will not solve the woes that have long plagued Pagasa, whether the inadequate equipment it has had to make do with, or the perennial bureaucratic difficulties it has had to endure to receive proper attention and funding from the government.

Last August, at the height of Typhoon “Helen,” Pagasa employees startled the public when they conducted a lightning rally to press for the release of unpaid benefits, which, it turned out, had been suspended since March. The move jolted Malacañang and Congress to work to increase the salaries of Pagasa employees, and to embed their benefits in the annual budget instead of being sourced from the savings of the agency and the Department of Science and Technology.

That’s not the end of it. This year, the employees’ benefits were delayed again, revealed PWEA head Mon Agustin. “Our hazard and longevity benefits haven’t been given since January this year.”

It’s the same old story, with the beleaguered workers, many of them highly trained, some even with master’s degrees, still scrounging around for the respect they deserve for work that directly impacts the lives of all Filipinos. The departure of Servando et al. isn’t Pagasa’s loss alone, but also the nation’s.

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