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Headline: Philippines hailed as model in disaster response

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FUKUOKA—The Philippines leads Japan and other countries prone to natural disasters in terms of system preparedness, governance and youth participation in mitigating the impact of climate change on people and property, a disaster risk specialist said here on Tuesday.

Addressing the United Nations Settlement Program (UN-Habitat)'s 6th Asian City Journalists Conference (ACJC), Professor Rajob Shaw of the International Environmental and Disaster Management Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies at the Kyoto University said the Philippine model on disaster response must be replicated in Japan and elsewhere in the world.

"The Philippines has a very good system, particularly in the governance system when it comes to disaster preparedness from the community to the national level, something that is lacking here in Japan and in other countries," Shaw told a gathering of Asian journalists, UN regional officials, academicians, non-government organizations representatives in this oldest city in Japan.

The Philippine Daily Inquirer is one of the journalists-panelists in the conference which examines media's role during a disaster and in making disaster-resilient cities.

Calamity fund

Shaw cited the calamity fund allocation, which is about five percent of the development budget, from the national down to the barangay (village) level.

He said the calamity fund had been in place for 20 years and can be used for preparedness measures.

"That's a very, very important aspect. In Japan, we don't have that one. We don't have any specific amount of the city government budget that can be allocated for disaster preparedness," he said.

Shaw said he had been examining the Philippines' system of preparedness since he first came into the country in 1998 as an officer of the United Nations Center for Regional Development.

He had worked on several UN projects with officials of the Department of National Defense's Office of Civil Defense and the National Disaster Coordinating Council, now the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council.

According to Shaw, a regular funding requirement was "a very important governance structure" that was absent in Japan and elsewhere.

Shaw also particularly cited the high visibility of the Philippine president during relief efforts which could ensure national and international assistance to pour in.

"In the Philippines, you can see the President on television at the forefront of relief efforts and this is very good in the sense that when a president is seen or has very high visibility, it gives hope to the people during a local calamity, it gives a lot of media coverage, and it gives a lot of money especially when it is covered by the press," Shaw stressed.

"International money would surely come in that kind of situation and we call that the CNN (Cable News Network) syndrome. Unless it is covered by the press, international attention does not come," he stressed.

Another plus in the Philippine model, he said, is the extent of youth participation in pre- and -post disaster relief operations, as in city planning and decision-making.

He said that Filipino youth belonging to the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) in the villages has a seat in the city council and take part with the city mayor and other local officials in helping a community meet an emergency or make the city grow in the

future.

Youth volunteers

Also, the presence of science clubs in Philippine high schools whose members can be tapped as volunteers in information dissemination during rescue efforts and in disseminating information before a disaster strikes was a good thing.

Shaw said the Japanese youth who went to the stricken areas as volunteers for relief operation when the 2011 Magnitude 9 earthquake off the Pacific coast of Tohoku struck Japan that triggered a tsunami, did that only for a week.

Then they went back to their homes, waiting for the next disaster to happen, making their participation in disaster relief efforts short-term, he said.

Also unlike their Filipino youth counterparts, young Japanese could not take part in the formal discussion on decision-making in the city.

On the minus side, Shaw noted the lack of specific mitigation projects in the Philippines in post-disaster setting and efforts to change the mindset of the people.

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Like other nationals in Asia, he said Filipinos were "stubborn" and would refuse to leave their houses and belongings even in the face of death.