

Headline: Speaking as one voice on climate change

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Thoughts of Cyclone “Nargis” still obviously linger in the mind of Dr. Tun Lwin, former chief meteorologist of Myanmar (Burma) until his retirement, and now a consultant with the Myanmar Climate Change Watch.

It was under Dr. Tun’s watch that Nargis (“daffodil” in Urdu) was first spotted approaching that country in 2008. Five days before it made landfall, he alerted authorities on the severity of the approaching cyclone (the term used for “typhoon” in South Asia). Even worse, the cyclone was headed toward an area that had not been hit by a cyclone before—the densely populated Irrawaddy Delta, an agricultural production center.

But, says the 67-year-old Dr. Tun, “the authorities chose to ignore my warnings.” He attributed it to the preparations being undertaken for a national referendum on constitutional amendments being undertaken by the military junta running the Myanmar government then, which was to take place a few days after the cyclone hit.

So, despite the “best forecast of my life,” says Dr. Tun, Cyclone Nargis still devastated his country. Nargis is today considered the “worst natural disaster in the recorded history of Myanmar,” and the eighth deadliest cyclone of all time.

Nargis sent a storm surge through the affected area, resulting in at least 84,537 dead (other estimates put the total number of dead at 138,000), mostly as a result of drowning because the populace had not been alerted or evacuated to higher areas. Worse, the junta initially refused any international aid, relenting only after much criticism had been aired, and accepting only an offer from India.

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WHEN he began speaking out about the lack of official response and preparedness for Nargis, Dr. Tun naturally ran into difficulties with higher officials. Which is why, after his retirement, he chose to set up a nonprofit group, and, declaring that “I can’t stop working,” continued with his forecasting and study of weather patterns.

But it wasn’t until he adopted social media with enthusiasm that Dr. Tun began to develop a large public following. His Facebook page averages 70,000 “likes,” second in Myanmar only to the site of the head of the country’s information agency.

It’s his high public profile and years of expertise that made Dr. Tun the logical choice as the author of “Weathering Extremes: The Need for a Stronger Asean Response,” a policy brief that “details the effects of climate-related disasters and what actions the Asean needs to take to curb these impacts.” The study was commissioned by the A-FAB, or Asean for a Fair, Ambitious and Binding Global Climate Deal, composed of Oxfam, Greenpeace Southeast Asia and Eropa.

“Weathering Extremes” was launched a day before the United Nations Climate Summit in New York, where more than 120 heads of state (including P-Noy) met and discussed their commitments to a common response to climate change. According to a briefer, the A-FAB “wants Asean leaders

to speak as one voice for the region to demand a fair, ambitious and binding global climate deal, and for financing for adaptation as well as loss and damage.”

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BUT Dr. Tun, for one, isn’t holding his breath. Having taken part in international conferences sponsored by the UN, he declares that “UN Conferences of Parties are totally useless.” Instead, he bats for negotiations and agreements “between countries and among countries in the region,” speaking with one voice. Climate change, he says, is “a regional problem.”

He adds: “Extreme weather events are increasing in the region, and we all suffer from [their] impacts. I think this should be a call for us to work together, especially in terms of adaptation and mitigation.” In the last decade alone, weather-related calamities cost the region tens of thousands of lives and more than \$4 billion annually.

Climate change is affecting people’s lives directly, says Dr. Tun, and the poor are the ones bearing the brunt of suffering. He cites some impacts of climate change: changes in weather patterns, more weather disturbances, with more destructive power; droughts; dwindling agricultural production; and a predicted overall rise in sea temperatures of four degrees Centigrade by the end of the century, which, he warns, “is just 86 years away,” and which can devastate the food security of affected countries. “Asean will be the worst hit,” he warns.

By far the worst impact of climate change, he says, is the emergence of growing numbers of “economic refugees,” who, facing lower crop yields and unexpected changes in weather patterns, will be driven to seek livelihoods across borders, leading to political instability throughout the region.

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NOT only should governments in the region begin talking between and among themselves, says Dr. Tun, but so should departments within governments. He decries the “fragmented response” adopted by authorities. He says environmental experts should be talking to agriculture officials to discuss how to help farmers adjust their planting and harvesting seasons. Health officials need to be aware of future threats to health by changing weather conditions. Education officials need to adjust the school calendar and discuss how they can better instill environmental awareness among students.

Asked if he has ever despaired of our capacity to respond to climate change, Dr. Tun declares that “I never lose hope, but I know that it is difficult. We all need to work very hard if we want to respond to the situation.”

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Cyclone Nargis may still tug at his conscience, and Typhoon “Yolanda” may still instill fear and guilt among survivors, but not all is lost—but only if we can begin talking and cooperating within and across our borders.