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“There is no ‘normal’ to return to,” Earth Policy Institute’s Lester Brown warns. Driven by climate swings, the world is in constant flux. Things will not “shortly return to normal, as in generations past… [Instead] a new geopolitics of food scarcity” is emerging.

Floods swamped the Philippines. The most severe drought in half a century blistered the United States and swaths of Eastern Europe. The Arctic ice cap is melting at speeds never recorded since satellite monitoring began 30 years back, the Norwegian Polar Institute cautions.

Warming seas now wash farther inland. Countries must redo midyear estimates. The Philippines is anticipating a 20-centimeter sea level rise over the next 40 years.

The severest threat is “along the Pacific seaboard: from Samar to eastern Mindanao,” Wendy Clavano wrote in “Environmental Science for Social Change.” The “high risk” provinces 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, estimates Clavano, a PhD from Cornell University. “The rising sea level has taken a back seat because increased flooding has a more serious and immediate effect.”

“Adios Summer Sea Ice,” is how Huffington Post titled reports that the Arctic sea could be ice-free for a day or more by 2020. The consequences will be severe. Weather extremes already sear the world’s breadbasket: North America.

Ever hear of “climate bombs” aka “clathrates”? Below the Arctic, these icy structures enclose potent greenhouse gas. Methane had been safely caged—until now. But its permafrost container is thawing.

Already, “methane is being emitted from thousands of sites in the Arctic” notes the journal Nature Geoscience. “Far more carbon is escaping from permafrost in Arctic Siberia than previously thought.”

This threat frames a 17-percent add-on to cereal prices, the Food and Agriculture Organization reported this September. Delayed rains in India and Australia ratcheted pressure on stocks. These impacted on the poorest.

“Hunger knows no friend than its feeder,” Greek writer Aristophanes noted. Today, there’s a potential for replays of the 2007-2008 food riots in Haiti and Egypt, frets FAO senior economist Abdolreza Abbassian. “Anything is possible.”

“Families [will] take their children out of school and eat less nutritious food to compensate for high prices,” World Bank president Jim Yong Kim predicted in unusually blunt language. “We cannot allow these historic price hikes to turn into a lifetime of perils.”

The Asian Development Bank held a timely forum on “Food Prices in Asia: Is there a Coming Crisis?” It heard economist Giap Minh Bui’s projection that the Philippines won’t achieve its target of self-sufficiency in rice by the end of 2013. Why?

Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia spend less to raise rice. In the Philippines, “despite recent progress, land reform measures were far from successful. [Much of] productive labor works overseas… There’s been insignificant private investment in on-farm productive infrastructure.”

“It is less costly to transport corn from Thailand than from Mindanao,” ADB’s lead agriculturist Lourdes Adriano told the forum. “Sea transport regulations here … are prohibitive.”

Government must craft policies that enable farmers to turn a profit. These should include: fertilizer, improved storage, more farm-to-market roads, and market infrastructure like roll-on, roll-off port facilities.

“It is futile to go against the political tide,” Adriano conceded. “[Many] governments opt for self-sufficiency and increasing buffer stocks.” Still, some “out of the box” solutions can include rethinking the concept of reserve management. “Transparency and good governance in reserve management, together with the private sector playing a [key] role, a la Singapore, may be the second best option. Complement this with regional reserve management.” She pointed to Asean +3’s emergency rice reserve system and South Asia’s food bank.

The Doha round is dead. Regional action may be the way to go, Adriano added. That calls for risk management tools, like a weather-based index, a second look at warehouse receipts, and a local commodity exchange, among others.

Study what happens to plants when the mercury bolts up, scientists urge. Between 68 and 95 degrees Fahrenheit, photosynthesis—the process where plant tissues, exposed to light, blend water and chemicals, sprout and bear fruit—remains steady. But at 95 degrees F, photosynthesis wobbles. “At 104 degrees F, photosynthesis ceases entirely. At such elevated temperatures, plants go into thermal shock.”

Intense heat disrupts pollination—a process where insects and birds transfer microspores in a seed plant to another, resulting in growth. Corn’s complex pollination system makes it particularly vulnerable. Crops fail when photosynthesis and pollination are disrupted.

“We’re looking at a future of rising food prices driven by rising temperatures,” Lester Brown stresses in “Full Planet, Empty Plates,” his forthcoming book. “Restoring balance may depend on new energy and population policies than on any agricultural policy we can conceive.”

Evening prime-time news here leads with police-blotter crimes. Supreme Court justices play hooky at Monday flag ceremonies, papers report. Corazon Aquino’s administration and US customs “stole my jewels,” wails Imelda Marcos under another headline.

Has our national dialogue calcified into “the normal”—precisely when “there is no ‘normal’ to return to”?

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