

Headline: El Niño redux

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In 1997, or 17 years ago, I wrote a three-part series on the El Niño phenomenon. I did a lot of reading on the subject on hard copy. The Internet was not yet just a click away. I tried to understand the scientific explanations, I interviewed experts and those who might be affected—the pre-writing part, we call it. Then I sat down to write. I remember receiving a science and technology award for that special report and going home with a cash award and a trophy. (They gave cash awards in those days.) Yes, for writing about an impending calamitous phenomenon.

I remember little of that long piece now. I have to again get acquainted with the subject of El Niño/La Niña. But this time, gathering information is easier. The Internet is now just a click away. I called up the Inquirer library to ask if my November 1997 special report had been digitalized and if I could please be sent a copy via e-mail. I did not want to dig into my clippings. After a few minutes I received a copy via e-mail. (Thanks, Ellen.)

How technology has made getting information faster and easier. But don't we all wish that science and technology, which are developing by leaps and bounds, would also solve the world's weather problems just as fast? If they can't, there is the consolation that they can at least be used to deliver the bad news and warnings pretty fast so that the world as we know it does not perish sooner but later.

We are now being inundated with El Niño warnings for 2014, and the weird weather we will experience—hot-dry, wet-wild. Some places will get the worst of one or the other, or both. Food producers will feel the blow, but so will the rest of us who are dependent on what the much abused earth, sea and sky can deliver to our dining tables given the hostile conditions.

What things did I say about El Niño in 1997? "An unwelcome climatic phenomenon that, scientists say, will confound us all," I began. I quoted something I had read: "A global-scale oceanographic/meteorological phenomenon that develops in the Pacific, most often off Peru. It is associated with extreme climatic variability characterized by devastating rains, winds, drought and other events that could result in economic disaster."

I did interview at that time Pagasa's chief meteorologist, Aida Jose, and this is what I gathered: El Niño is not a direct result of global warming that is blamed on the havoc that human beings have done to the earth, sea and sky. There is something else that is at work on this planet and in the atmosphere, something that has gone on for millions of years outside of humankind's doings.

Doesn't the Bible have stories of strange climatic conditions that brought about deluges and droughts as well as plagues and famines? During the time of the pharaohs and the prophets, there was as yet no greenhouse effect, no hole in the ozone layer to speak of.

But here is the big But. The severity of the effects of El Niño will be proportionate to the severity of the situation on the ground—that is, how badly people have treated the areas that it will hit. Water will be doubly scarce in logged-over areas. Floodwaters will be doubly high in places with clogged canals. In other words, humans have only themselves to blame.

It's bad enough that a calamity of biblical proportion outside of humankind's doing—literally the act of God—occurs. But when it doubles in severity because of uncaring citizens of Earth, we are indeed the worse for it.

I did learn that during a severe El Niño event, sea surface temperatures are measurably higher than normal over a large expanse of the South Pacific which can prevail for more than a year. The implication of El Niño spreads from the local to the global. It is linked to the devastating climatic impacts on North America, Europe, West Africa and India, not just in the Southern Pacific.

This occurrence in the Pacific clearly affects the rest of the world because of the extra heat it generates and the storms it triggers. An unlikely wind-ocean conspiracy results in temperature change over a large equatorial swath of the Pacific Ocean and further results in weird weather and extreme situations.

Climatologists and meteorologists can explain away the dynamics at work, but the why of it is the mystery.

So, are we prepared for El Niño's return? Without El Niño, the Philippines has had more than its share of calamities in the past years. How much more can we endure?

From my readings, I gathered that El Niño experts bewail the fact that forecasters sound too conservative for fear of causing a panic. Panic could mean increase in food prices because of expected poor agricultural production. What to do?

Now scientists are saying that the El Niño event that occurs every 20 years or so could become more frequent, like every 10 years, due to global warming. We can now blame ourselves for its devastating frequency. Think about this: more severe and more frequent. A quadruple whammy. It's not all God's doing then.

Today scientists are discovering how El Niño responds to global warming. There is El Niño and there is extreme El Niño, which develops differently from the regular El Niño that originates in the Western Pacific. Extreme El Niño has a different area of origin—the normally cold and dry eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean.

An El Niño event usually straddles two years, which means that the 2014 event will spill over to 2015. Already, scientists are about to declare that 2014 could be the hottest yet since temperature recording began, and that there would be more devastating floods, droughts, wild fires and other calamities that will befall our planet.

Oratio imperata, our plea for divine deliverance, will have effects only if we buckle down to prepare. Like Noah, we have to do our part.

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