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Headline: 'Pope's meeting with Yolanda survivors shows urgency for climate change pact'

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MANILA, Philippines—When Pope Francis shares a meal with survivors of natural disasters in Palo town, Leyte province, on Saturday, he will be “doing much more than demonstrating his love for the poor,” the head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction says.

Margareta Wahlstrom, also UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon’s special representative for disaster risk reduction, said on Thursday the Pope’s visit to the storm-ravaged Eastern Visayas community “will encourage us all to reflect on how we can seize the opportunity to make 2015 the Year of Resilience by reaching historic agreements on new measures to reduce the impact of natural disasters, climate change and to adopt a new set of sustainable development goals.”

By sharing a simple lunch of Filipino dishes with 30 survivors of the 2013 earthquake in Bohol province and of Supertyphoon “Yolanda” (international name: Haiyan), Francis will be setting the stage for the release of an encyclical on climate change, urging the world’s 1.2 billion Catholics to take collective action on moral and ethical grounds.

The encyclical, 50 to 60 pages long, will be sent to the world’s 5,000 Catholic bishops and 400,000 priests, who will distribute it to parishioners.

In September, the Pope will follow up the encyclical by addressing the UN General Assembly, according to Bishop Marcelo Sorondo, chancellor of the Vatican’s Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in a report published by The Guardian of London last December 14.

The objective, Sorondo said, would be to directly influence the UN climate talks in Paris in December, which would try to conclude 20 years of fraught negotiations with a universal commitment to reduce carbon emissions.

In a statement, a copy of which was e-mailed to the Philippine Daily Inquirer, Wahlstrom said the Pope’s apostolic trip to the Philippines and his solidarity with the people of Tacloban City, ground zero for Yolanda, which left more than 6,300 people dead and tens of thousands homeless, “should speak volumes to world leaders and government officials tasked with adopting a series of new agreements this year [that] will form the basis for tackling poverty in the next 15 to 20 years.”

Manila Archbishop Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle has called attention to the significance of the Pope’s breaking bread with the poor victims of natural disasters, who are still living in tents more than a year after the 7.2-magnitude earthquake and the world’s most powerful storm destroyed their homes.

“Pope Francis comes after a series of natural and human-caused disasters that the Filipino people experienced in 2013 and 2014: earthquakes, typhoons and armed conflicts,” Tagle said.

“But let us not forget the daily disaster of poverty and inequality as seen in children and families living on the streets, homeless people, human trafficking, unemployment and underemployment, forced migration, prostitution, illegal drugs, corruption, missing persons and environmental degradation,” he said.

Pope Francis will bring the mercy and compassion of Jesus to the tired, weary and those who find life burdensome, according to Tagle.

In March, the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, “will update the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) based on the experience of the last 10 years, including Haiyan, with the overall objective of reducing mortality and economic losses.”

The HFA, the global blueprint for disaster risk reduction, was adopted by UN member-states in 2005 after the Indian Ocean tsunami took over 227,000 lives.

“Among other things, this will require a strong focus on better standards of housing for the poor and a huge effort to protect or move millions of people out of danger zones along storm and flood-exposed coasts, river banks, unstable hillsides and seismic zones,” she asserted.

Wahlstrom emphasized “organization and understanding of what drives risk are essential to building resilience.”

“A new universally accepted agreement on climate change will help to avoid the creation of new risks, and a comprehensive new set of sustainable development goals will provide the world with the necessary guidance for improving the lot of humanity,” she also stressed.

The UN official pointed out that Yolanda was an “object lesson on how poverty and disasters are intertwined. The strongest storm ever to make landfall affected the poorest of the poor the most.”

“Typhoon Haiyan claimed over 6,000 lives on November 8, 2013 when it made landfall six times as it crossed the Philippine archipelago, destroying more than one million homes and affecting 14 million people, leaving many homeless, injured and children orphaned. It cost the country \$12 billion in economic losses,” she said.

Tacloban, she noted, “was the storm’s epicenter. It destroyed schools, health facilities, housing, places of work, the airport and other critical infrastructure spread out along the exposed coastline.”

“The location of housing and key infrastructure exposed them to the full impact of the storm and vulnerability was increased by the poor quality of construction. The city also experienced typhoons in 1897 and 1912, which killed some 22,000 people,” she said.

According to Wahlstrom, “the reasons why many people died in an age of advanced weather forecasting varied.”

“Many poor communities refused to leave their shanties because they were afraid they would not be allowed to return. Some did not understand what a tidal surge was. Some did not believe the warnings because there was no obvious change in the weather prior to the storm’s arrival. Others did not move to evacuation centers because they felt safer in their homes.”

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She added, “additional efforts are needed to build back better, including stronger livelihoods, government safety nets for the poor, more resilient infrastructure and local governments with more capacity. It is vital future investments on social development, along with new infrastructure, that will improve people’s resilience and avoid the creation of new risk in line with the priorities of the Hyogo

Framework for Action.”