

Headline: Horror loop

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Less than 24 hours after rains brought by Tropical Storm “Mario” submerged the metropolis, causing the evacuation of thousands of families and damage to many households, the floodwaters were mostly gone. The rains having moved to the north, the floods subsided, leaving behind muck and tons of garbage.

That scene tells us something. Manila’s original topography as a riverine region crisscrossed by one mighty river and many creeks, streams and estuaries appears to allow for the quick disposal of water. Ancient Maynilad, while prone to seasonal flooding as a coastal community, also benefited from a matrix of natural canals that quickly emptied it of excess water, with everything eventually ending up in Manila Bay and Laguna de Bay.

Many of those canals and estuaries are now long gone, paved over with concrete, blocked with human habitation, or used as plain dumping ground for refuse and trash. As Manila has burgeoned into a choked city of 12 million people, much of its natural waterways have been lost, while successive administrations have not had the foresight to build enough sewerage and storm drain systems to accommodate the explosion in human density and activity. The result, as the experience with Tropical Storm “Ondoy” and now with Mario shows, is a metropolis that drowns in devastating, paralyzing floods time and again.

What was depressing about Mario was not so much that, according to a Pagasa report, in a span of just 12 hours, it dumped nearly a month’s worth of rain on the city. The flooding was so quick that many residents barely had time to flee their suddenly inundated homes. Some 37,000 people were displaced in the metro—Pasay City alone saw 100 barangays flooded, with about 4,671 families affected—and more than half a million people in both Metro Manila and other provinces had to move to escape the deluge.

That was tragedy enough, but more disheartening was the sense of déjà vu that engulfed anyone seeing the sorry images on TV. Ondoy in 2009 was deemed the worst flooding that Metro Manila had seen in 40 years. The scale of that disaster—more than 400 fatalities, four million affected, economic losses in the region of P23 billion—should have served as a wake-up call that the Philippines’ capital is facing worse environmental problems if it continued to ignore long-festering problems such as sanitation and garbage disposal, haphazard zoning, inadequate flood-control planning, etc.

And that wake-up call need not have been confined to the government alone. Ordinary residents have a responsibility to dispose of their trash properly—but do they? The detritus that washed up along Roxas Boulevard in the aftermath of Mario testifies to the deadly mix that arises from negligent garbage disposal by people, on one hand, and poor garbage collection by the government, on the other. The city’s remaining waterways, fouled up and obstructed by unending effluvia from millions of households on a daily basis, are simply overwhelmed when rainwater of biblical proportions visits the metro. All that irresponsibility then comes around to exact its revenge, bringing to mind the old lines traditionally attributed to Chief Seattle: “Whatever befalls the Earth befalls the sons of the Earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.”

But the government must bear the bigger blame, because it is in a better position to make a difference. It extracts taxes that are meant to improve the living conditions of citizens, but what the

public sees is gross inefficiency, absence of foresight, and sheer inability to learn from previous experiences of devastation to craft policies and projects that address malingering problems and bottlenecks. After Ondoy, which happened during the Arroyo administration, what flood-control projects did the Aquino administration initiate? Were garbage collection and disposal improved, storm drains and waterways dredged and cleared up, new studies commissioned to explore innovative means by which Metro Manila, and the rest of the country, can survive the onslaught of even more disastrous storms promised by climate change?

The reflex gesture of TV newscasters and the viewing public alike to hark back to Ondoy at the height of Mario is a telling indication of the bigger tragedy we're in: We're trapped in an unending cycle, a horror loop. We should have learned from the costly lessons of the recent past, but that nagging sense of déjà vu says we haven't.

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