Headline: Kidapawan, climate change and conflict

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Munich, Germany—With another El Niño projected to form this year, one can wonder if policymakers have done proper analyses of the ways in which climate change could contribute to conflicts and security problems in the Philippines. The linkages between climate change, security, and conflict are, of course, complex, multifarious, and challenging to predict or, at the very least, tease out, but we have to carefully study climate-change-induced conflict and incorporate it to policy.

In my book titled “Strategies for Rapid Climate Mitigation,” I refer to climate change as a threat multiplier. This means that climate change, among many other factors, whether geographic, political, economic, or their combinations, can potently drive conflicts. It does not follow, however, that more wars are guaranteed in a warmer world. What can be said is it can increase the likelihood of conflicts.

Take, for example, food security issues resulting from drought, which, in turn, can be prolonged by climate change. Food insecurity can well and easily lead to crises, including violent ones. The ongoing crisis in Syria somehow followed the climate-drought-food insecurity-conflict logic. A Nature article reports how precipitation changes were linked to rising sea-level pressure and long-term warming trends in Eastern Mediterranean. This created variable dust activity leading to droughts devastating the greater Fertile Crescent. With protracted drought, rural Syrian farmers were forced to migrate to urban centers, only to be confronted with higher food prices. A civil uprising in 2011 broke and led to the Syrian civil war.

One caveat: The Syrian drought, however severe, is in itself insufficient reason for this conflict. It would be hubris to say that we can precisely disentangle those many factors and point solely to one factor—climate change in this case—as its single trigger. California, for example, hasn’t descended into a bloody civil war during the drought of 2015-2016. For this reason, one has to mix in other drivers. In the Syrian case, it could be the confluence of economic poverty, the Syrian government’s wastage of water resources, the flow of Iraqi and Palestinian refugees, and a whole web of other social and political factors enveloping an already stressed region.

Moving closer to home, the Kidapawan crisis of 2016—the anniversary of which we commemorate late this month until early April—can be said to have been triggered by climate change, among many factors. The climate connection can be thought of as follows: Climate change manifested itself through a weird weather system, in this case a prolonged El Niño. The drought disturbed an agriculture system poorly adapted to a much longer dry spell and resulted in food insecurity. This then drove farmers to protest, only to be violently dispersed. A number of farmers were killed, while members of the police force were wounded.

But climate change should not be used as a scapegoat in the Kidapawan crisis. Fingers have to be pointed essentially to the government’s failure to address the lingering poverty and inequity in the Cotabato provinces. Ill-conceived crisis response—the lack of climate-resilient public policy, including a poor crowd control system—also raised the odds of that unwarranted violence.

As we remember Kidapawan, we must not forget that we are in the age of climate consequences. Governments can no longer be comfortable governing in terms that defined the norms of the past. Thus, the biggest lesson of the Kidapawan crisis is that it showed how climate change could

become a threat multiplier. Climate change and its security ramifications, alongside the lingering challenges of poverty and social inequity, have to be incorporated in public policy.

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