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Headline: Should we take Mayor Duterte seriously on global warming?

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Presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte castigated former US vice president Al Gore and the United Nations on the issue of curbing carbon emissions ("Environmental agenda," Cebu Daily News, 3/27/16). While he had a valid point when he said that at this stage in our economic development, we cannot do away with the energy from coal plants, his criticism of Gore for coming to urge our government to switch to renewable energy when he could not convince his country to reduce its carbon emissions was a bad case of nitpicking. If the Americans do not do their part in checking global warming, should that prevent us from doing ours?

Other than doing what is right when one is faced with a shared problem, there is a more compelling reason for the Philippines to take decisive action on the threat of climate change, of which Duterte seems unaware: The country is classified as extremely vulnerable to global warming. In fact, we are ranked 13 among 186 countries in the Climate Change Vulnerability Index for 2016. With that, we should welcome and be thankful to anyone who contributes to the effort to slow down, if not stop, its seemingly inexorable advance. We should be the first to acknowledge that keeping the planet livable for ourselves and for future generations is a gargantuan task that demands the concerted effort of the entire human race, a movement transcending all barriers, least of all petty considerations like who gets to take action first.

Not Duterte. Stressing that with our near-zero carbon footprint, it is not fair for us to make drastic cuts on our carbon emissions when the United States and other countries with massive carbon footprints are just taking their own sweet time, Duterte dissed Gore for coming to preach the urgency of switching to clean energy even though he had failed to convert his fellow Americans to his climate change agenda.

Duterte also branded the United Nations a hypocrite for asking small nations to comply with their carbon emission-reduction commitments while failing to impose sanctions on the worst environmental culprits. Duterte does not dispute the urgent need to curb carbon emission; he only balks at the suggestion that the country does something about it while nations most responsible for the problem are not lifting a finger. In so doing, he seems to labor under the notion that it is possible to dispense quick justice on environmental offenders in the same manner criminals in Davao City are said to get their comeuppance a lot quicker than their fellows in other parts of the country do.

The instinct of self-preservation and logic demand that the Philippines, as one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change, be at the forefront of the fight against the threat. But then again how and when could we play an active role when we insist that each nation should first contribute to the cure of global warming corresponding to the exact degree of their participation in causing the phenomenon as a precondition to our cooperation in the worldwide movement to stop or slow it down? What if the event that will finally compel the industrialized nations to take Gore and the United Nations seriously is the submersion of, say, the whole island of Mindanao due to rising sea levels brought about by higher temperature of the earth? Shall we wait for that catastrophe to take place before we act?

—ESTANISLAO ALBANO, JR., [email protected]

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