

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Stronger Asean response to climate change pressed

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Published Date: 05:30 PM September 22, 2014

Section: globalnation

Word Count: 768

Content:

MANILA, Philippines — A regional coalition of environmentalists are demanding a stronger and united response by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to climate change, which has the most impact on a region where natural disasters cause \$4.4 billion in damage annually.

At a press conference in Quezon City a day ahead of the United Nations Climate Summit in New York, the Asean for a Fair, Ambitious, Binding Global Climate Deal (A-FAB) Coalition asked Southeast Asian leaders to “speak as one voice for the region.”

A-FAB, composed of Oxfam-East Asia, the Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration (EROPA), and Greenpeace Southeast Asia, launched Monday its policy brief: “Weathering Extremes: The need for a stronger Asean response,” which details the effects of climate-related disasters and the actions that the region needs to take to reduce their impact.

Dr. Tun Lwin, chief executive officer of the Myanmar Climate Change Watch and policy author, said that climate change is the entire region’s concern, pointing out, “Extreme weather events are increasing in the region and we all suffer from its impacts. I think this should be a call for us to work together, especially in terms of adaptation and mitigation.”

For his part EROPA secretary general Orly Mercado said, “We must ensure that the Asean economic community is low carbon, sustainable and there should be a policy on the use of renewable energy.”

He said A-FAB wants Asean leaders to “fast-track initiatives that will build climate resilience among member-states while encouraging members to allocate sufficient budgetary funds to support appropriate technology and community-driven climate adaptation initiatives.”

“Unless we put our money where our mouth is, it will all be platitudes, slogans, and conferences and meetings and not quite enough being done” to reduce the impact of climate change, he said.

Mercado said Asean leaders should undertake initiatives to address trans-border climate change issues.

“At the UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), Asean countries must coordinate their collective voice in pushing for a fair, ambitious and legally binding global climate change deal. For us, nothing less than this is required because it is a matter of survival,” Mercado said.

In his policy brief, Lwin noted that from 2002 to 2011, the highest number of deaths due to natural disasters worldwide was observed in Asia and the Pacific at nearly 750,000 with close to half of the number or 47 percent in the Southeast Asian region.

He cited a 2012 World Bank report which states that each year on average, Southeast Asia suffers damage in excess of \$4.4 billion from natural hazards.

“While disaster risk reduction is an Asean priority, similar attention must be given to slow-onset climate impacts which, while not immediately visible, can have equally devastating effects,” Lwin said, referring to heat extremes and rising sea levels.

“Agriculture is a main concern in the context of climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts. As the region’s main source of livelihood, the agriculture sector’s level of danger from climate change impacts becomes higher. Food security in the region, which is already a concern, will become a major issue if such trends continue,” he said.

Lwin pointed out that in his country the monsoon is considered a lost treasure.

“Myanmar, ranked 7th among global rice producers in 2010, is already experiencing the impacts of climate change in its agricultural production as monsoon patterns have become disrupted,” he said, citing the monsoon’s late onset, early withdrawal, shorter duration and its disappearance causing rainfall shortage. There is also a downtrend in the frequency of cyclones.

Lwin said Asean should ensure that the region’s proposed integrated economy be low carbon and sustainable through policy support for renewable energy; help all member-countries to be more climate resilient through the allocation of funds for climate adaptation projects; and raise its voice in the UN climate change conference.

He also suggested that Asean take a unified approach in dealing with the effects of climate change and harmonize climate policies; as well as move as a regional bloc to develop a framework and plan of action on agricultural adaptation focused on sustainability, food security, and climate resilience.

“With Southeast Asia facing a future of uncertainty, the Asean must show itself to be a pillar of stability and a driving force responsive to the needs of its citizens by urgently and strongly addressing the challenge of climate change,” Lwin said.

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