

Headline: 'Right' disaster?

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The window to ease the impacts of global warming is closing more rapidly than earlier estimated, says the World Bank in a study released last Wednesday. Sea level surges will double as mountain glaciers melt. They'll interlock with intense storms inflicting deaths and damage.

What happens when, in the words of the study, "rainfall becomes more sporadic and, in rainy season, even more intense"? Inquirer's Michael Tan sketches a graphic answer from "Emong," this season's first storm.

"Monday night, I broke my own record of airport commuting ordeals, clocking 13 hours to get from the Ninoy Aquino International Airport to my home in San Juan. I left Naia at about 5:30 p.m. in a taxi." By 8 p.m., Tan was still stuck in Makati. At 11 p.m., he gave up and took a hotel room. "I finally got home at 6:30 a.m. the next day."

Hindi ka nag-iisa, supporters of political prisoner Ninoy Aquino used to say. Thousands were also stranded. Storm "Fabian" lurks around the corner. And rainy season's end is still 17 or more typhoons away.

Among seven cities, Manila is second most at risk from climate change, reports the 2013 Climate Change Vulnerability Index, which studied 197 countries. Others are: Dhaka, Bangkok, Yangon, Jakarta, Ho Chi Minh and Calcutta.

Rising sea levels could uproot 13.6 million Filipinos by 2050, the Asian Development Bank projected in an earlier study titled "Addressing Climate Change and Migration in Asia and the Pacific." Three typhoons, in as many years, lashed Mindanao. The island used to reel from a wayward storm every 17 years or so.

World leaders are committed to curb greenhouse emissions and tamp down temperature increases to about 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, (2 degrees Celsius). There are concerns "that temperatures will soar to 5 degrees Celsius over a century," the 2012 World Bank study noted.

The 2013 study, therefore, narrowed the focus on the next few years. The heaviest impact will slam parts of Asia most prone to flooding and harsh tropical storms, it warned. Bangkok could be swamped by floods in 2030. Hanoi's just-built new flood control systems are obsolete. Rising ocean temperatures and saltwater intrusion into rivers could ruin local fisheries. Fish is a key source of protein for the people of Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Countries must redo earlier estimates. A projected 20-centimeter sea-level rise here over the next 40 years is an obsolete projection. This threat still runs "along the Pacific seaboard: from Samar to eastern Mindanao," Wendy Clavano wrote in "Environmental Science for Social Change." Only it is more severe.

The high-risk provinces flank Lingayen Gulf, Camotes Sea, Guimaras Strait, waters along Sibuyan and central Sulu, plus bays in Iligan, Lamon and Bislig. Chances of Manila flooding yearly rose to 65 percent, and Davao's to 90 percent, estimates Clavano, a Cornell University PhD holder. "Rising sea level took a back seat because increased flooding had a more immediate effect."

This issue is a major stumbling block to alleviating global poverty, warned World Bank President Jim Yong Kim. Progress of the last 20 years could be set back if nations must divert scarce resources to recover from storms and natural disasters. Those funds are needed in health, education and other services.

The bank will provide loans for Asian countries to cope with inevitable climate shifts. It prods agribusinesses to focus “on how major crops can be altered to live with less water, hotter temperatures.” Support is given for crop science and genetics. Will scientists win the race to produce drought-resistant varieties of corn and other plants—or lose to mass hunger, say in Sub-Saharan Africa? A “magic bullet” may prove elusive.

In a report released Friday in Nairobi, the UN Environment Programme said that the private sector’s future will hinge on its ability to develop goods and services that reduce impacts from sea levels to emissions of harmful chemicals.

“GEO-5 for Business: Impacts of a Changing Environment on the Corporate Sector” notes significant business opportunities for greener urban construction and retrofits. These are in cities where 60 percent of infrastructure still has to be built. Markets for organic food and beverages expanded by 10 to 20 percent yearly during the last decade. Companies certified as sustainable food producers can also tap into growing customer demand.

Eight out of 10 Filipinos say they “personally experienced” climate change impacts over the last three years, Social Weather Stations found in a survey conducted March 19-22, 2013. The affected proportions were highest in the National Capital Region (91 percent). Luzon had 87 percent; the Visayas, 84 percent; and Mindanao, 78 percent.

Many survey respondents say they have to fully understand climate change’s impacts. Thirty-seven percent participated in at least one effort to reduce risks resulting from climate change (e.g., contacted civil society organizations, gave donations, etc.). And 63 percent said they did not do anything.

At a Bonn meeting last week, Bangladesh said its cities plan to adapt to more water. It allocated \$470 million to grow forests on the coastal belt and build multistory shelters to house cyclone victims. Thailand awarded bids for flood management. “Solutions to the problem of rising seas are being studied.”

Cebu is the most ecologically brittle of Philippine cities. Debate swirls around Rep. Tomas Osmeña’s becoming barangay captain. That would wedge him into the city council—and place him in position to harass reelected Mayor Mike Rama.

“We are on the verge of a global transformation,” billionaire David Rockefeller said. “All we need is the right major crisis.” Is this it?

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