

Keyword: global-warming

Headline: 'Not caring about climate change is inhuman'

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Published Date: 04:30 AM October 10, 2015

Section: globalnation

Word Count: 834

Content:

"Why should we care about climate change?"

Some 300 artists, academics, environmentalists, spiritual leaders, tribal folk, policymakers and other climate advocates in the Summit of Conscience for the Climate gave various responses to this question on Friday morning, as they defined their personal stake in the planet ahead of critical climate talks in France in December.

"Not caring (about climate change) means destruction and death. Not caring is a violation of the basic human right to live," said Sen. Loren Legarda, who led the three-hour care summit held at the Senate.

Legarda is the United Nations champion for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction in Asia-Pacific.

The event was Manila's answer to the first climate conscience summit held in Paris on July 21, and was meant to prompt decisive Philippine representation at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21) in the French capital in December.

The French government has been aggressive in its campaign for climate action in the run-up to the Paris talks, determined to make history by getting leaders of 195 UN-member nations to finally reach the elusive agreement to limit carbon emissions and contain global warming.

Cut down emissions

Following the failure of previous COP meetings, the Paris conference hopes to conclude a binding pact that would cut down carbon emissions by 40 to 70 percent by 2050.

French President François Hollande made climate action his top agenda during his historic visit to the Philippines in February this year, that included a trip to Guiuan, Samar province, among the worst hit by Supertyphoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan) in 2013.

It was Hollande who first said that "the road to Paris starts in Manila," a statement that, Legarda said, focuses on the Philippines as one of the most vulnerable nations in the world.

"We have the least emissions (of greenhouse gases)," Legarda said, adding that despite the country contributing only 0.002 percent of the world's carbon emissions, the Philippines suffers the worst effects of climate change. "And that is climate injustice," she added.

Champions

The gathering had the participants signing the “Call to Conscience,” an appeal for the country’s delegates to the December climate talks to go to the conference “primarily as conscious human beings, not just representatives of a government or agency.”

The event on Friday was also aimed at building a critical mass of climate change champions ahead of the crucial negotiations in Paris, Legarda said.

Given three minutes to answer why everyone should care about changing climate, the response among participants in the Summit of Conscience varied from the religious and spiritual, to the pragmatic and practical.

Climate change is “not only about economy or politics, it is also about the spirit,” said Fr. Benny Tuazon of San Antonio de Padua parish in Manila.

“I believe that God created me in his image and likeness, (and) assigned me as a steward of his creations,” he added.

“We should care because nature continues to care for us,” responded former San Francisco, Cebu Mayor and now Councilor Alfredo Arquillano Jr., a 2011 UN Sasakawa Awardee for Disaster Risk Reduction.

Sonia Mendoza, head of the Mother Earth Foundation, said EcoWaste Coalition cares “because we have to leave our children a living planet.”

Simple changes

Mendoza appealed for simple lifestyle changes that make judicious use of natural resources, such as opting for reusable shopping bags instead of plastics.

Rodne Galicha, Philippine manager of the Climate Reality Project, a Washington-based agency founded by former US Vice President and climate advocate Al Gore, similarly called on Filipinos to put into practice the true meaning of economy as household managers or stewards.

Environmental lawyer Ipat Luna recalled a friend’s remark about the environmentalist’s approach to climate change: “This is not a war. This is like brushing your teeth. You do it every day.”

Green initiatives

University of the Philippines (UP) President Alfredo Pascual said the state university cares, with green initiatives such as introducing the use of electric jeeps, solar panels and environmentally friendly building designs in UP campuses.

In lieu of a speech, award-winning filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik staged a skit where he criticized the destructive impact of the West on the environment and on indigenous culture.

“It is no longer time to do business as usual,” Legarda said. “Every day, there are climate refugees still underserved, homeless, hungry or dying in the Philippines and many parts of the world... It is time to care, because the Philippines, the world, and the planet is in an emergency situation.

“We are in an ICU (intensive care unit) situation, where the usual economic development no longer applies,” the senator told the Inquirer in an interview at the close of the event.

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Legarda said the Call to Conscience and other initiatives for personal action against climate change will be cascaded to the country's public school system, from the elementary to the college level.