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There seems to be a profound sea change in the perceptions of the Armed Forces of the Philippines with regard to its role in a nation fraught with the perils of global warming. On his assumption as chief of staff of the AFP, Gen. Emmanuel Bautista stressed the evolving role of the soldier in the era of climate change (Inquirer, 1/18/13).

In his speech at the turnover of command at Camp Aguinaldo, General Bautista conceded that “in recent years, the effects of climate change have been more adverse than (the effects of) armed conflict.” He called on all Filipinos to join the military in winning the peace, securing the sovereignty of our state, and protecting our people from the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

Those of us in the Climate Change Commission welcome wholeheartedly the pronouncements of the new AFP chief.

Climate change represents the greatest challenge that the world faces in the 21st century, and General Bautista’s remarks reflect a broad appreciation that in our pursuit of wellbeing, we both influence and respond to climate. As the history of natural disasters in our country proves, typhoons, earthquakes, droughts and landslides devastate our population and the livelihoods they depend on.

Our vulnerability to climate change has the potential to undermine all our efforts at development and all our hopes for a better future. With the increasing number of people living in vulnerable coastal regions and overcrowded urban areas, it is more important than ever to advance our understanding of natural disasters and the ways in which we should respond to them.

In the troubled areas where our soldiers are normally deployed, in once lush and forested regions, our remaining natural resources are susceptible not only to climate variability (increased forest fire risk, pest and disease infestations, typhoon damage) but also to human ignorance and greed that perpetuate illegal logging and destructive practices.

By his commitment and vision, General Bautista has encouraged a better understanding in our military about the climate challenges that lie ahead. This should enable our fighting men to better develop tactical responses as they participate in proactive measures relative to environmental protection to help mitigate the impact of natural calamities.

Perhaps far more important, General Bautista—and may his tribe increase—has provided a fresh and vital focus in our common struggle for disaster mitigation and sustainable development.

We may have, finally, a soldier-leader who is aware that the awesome issue of climate change could, perchance, bring together our military and insurgent forces to work together in confronting the threat of mass destruction by climate catastrophe, the greatest threat of all to our national security. It is not unthinkable for peace to arrive on the wings of mutual interest—or mutual dread.

—HEHERSON T. ALVAREZ,

former environment secretary,

former chair, Senate Committee on Environment,

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commissioner, Climate Change Commission