

Headline: Extreme rainfall

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Extreme or unusual weather is the new normal; there is no excuse not to prepare for it. The weather disturbance that was “Agaton”—a low-pressure area that developed into the year’s first tropical depression, and then after three days weakened into an LPA again—is more proof that weather patterns are changing. Our disaster response strategies must change as well.

Various parts of Mindanao have been soaked by continuous rainfall for well over a week. Between Jan. 10 and 17, the Tropical Rainfall Measuring Mission of the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration monitored “extremely high rainfall totals of over 1,168 mm (about 46 inches) ... near northeastern Mindanao.” But it was only on Jan. 17 that the LPA intensified into a storm. In other words, the soaking did not coincide with Nasa’s monitoring period. Yesterday, our weather bureau Pagasa continued to forecast “moderate to heavy rains” in the area.

The impact has been very serious indeed. The national government lists 27 areas in three regions as having already declared a state of calamity, ranging in size from entire provinces (Agusan del Norte, Lanao del Norte) to moderately sized cities (Iligan, Tagum, Butuan) to smaller towns and municipalities (Cateel in Davao Oriental, Bunawan in Agusan del Sur, and Bislig in Surigao del Sur, to name only three).

As of 6 a.m. yesterday, a total of 42 deaths had been reported, with eight more persons deemed missing. Some 65 persons were also reported as injured. According to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, over 800,000 persons were affected by the weather disturbance, with a fourth of the total, or 203,022 persons, actually displaced and moved to 565 evacuation centers.

The NDRRMC also monitored 16 landslides and six floodings or flash floods; found 50 roads and 25 bridges impassable; recorded two rivers in Davao del Norte as having overflowed; and counted over 2,000 houses either totally or partially destroyed.

That is not the worst of it. Some of the areas affected by the unabated rains brought by the LPA/Agaton were the same ones devastated by Typhoon “Pablo” late the other year, or those damaged by Tropical Storm “Sendong” the year before that. Recovery from those disasters is a long way from being complete, and yet the same vulnerable communities are again struggling through yet another calamity.

The rains have also affected parts of Eastern Visayas, some of them still reeling from the catastrophic effects of Supertyphoon “Yolanda.”

We understand that national government agencies and their local counterparts have been in the thick of the action, warning residents and rescuing victims and staffing evacuation centers. But despite the continuing availability of prepositioned emergency relief resources, for instance, we cannot but share the concern that the usual procedures are no longer enough.

How many of those 565 evacuation centers listed by the NDRRMC, for example, are only temporarily converted school buildings? The open layout and single-story structure of most public elementary and secondary schools are fine for educational purposes; when used as evacuation

centers, the school building can prove vulnerable to floods and outbreaks of disease. Given the new normal, shouldn't the country invest in permanent evacuation centers designed precisely for the purpose? Such a facility, with adequate cooking areas, safe sleeping quarters and separate men's and women's toilets, can even serve as an attractive incentive, inducing more residents to heed the government's call to evacuate.

How many of the 2,000 houses listed as damaged or destroyed were in low-lying areas, or built illegally on riverbanks? Given the new normal, the country should steel itself for an honest-to-goodness campaign to relocate residents living in high-risk areas. The data from Pablo and Agaton, to cite one possibility, should allow government officials to accurately determine which parts of, say, Cateel, Davao Oriental, are truly vulnerable to changing weather patterns.

The calamity funds included in the newly passed national budget should be spent on the food packs and the rescue equipment that this spell of extreme rainfall in Mindanao makes necessary. But money should also be set aside to build permanent evacuation centers, or commission the vulnerability studies, or fund other necessary initiatives. The new normal requires it.

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