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Malacañang has taken Metro Manila mayors to task for not suspending classes early enough in areas affected by flash floods and heavy rains last Tuesday, reminding them of President Aquino's order requiring local governments to make the announcements not later than 4:30 a.m. But the move misses the forest for the trees. The key issue is twofold: the weather bureau's recurring failure to accurately forecast the amount of precipitation, and how the amount, hardly unusual for the wet season, could so flood Metro Manila and parts of Luzon as to disable them despite the hundreds of millions of pesos poured into flood control and public works because of the coming election season.

Executive Order No. 66, issued last January, gave local officials the prerogative to suspend classes in the absence of typhoon warnings from Pagasa. But that does not exempt Pagasa from giving accurate weather bulletins to guide the mayors. The weather bureau attributed Tuesday's downpour to a low-pressure area off Batangas, described by a forecaster as "a mini storm without the winds." But all of this was useless because Pagasa did not accurately predict the amount of rainfall so that local officials could not decide on time whether or not to suspend classes.

As it turned out, the water rose close to the spilling level of Ipo Dam in Bulacan and La Mesa Dam in Quezon City. If one considers that many of the weather disturbances in the past years dumped rains way past their historic thresholds, then Pagasa, despite "Ondoy" and "Sendong," remains truly incompetent. Even then, it's shocking that the moderate to heavy rainfall could inundate Metro Manila in so short a time, pushing traffic to a standstill, stranding tens of thousands, and immobilizing business and commercial activities. Alas, our storm-tossed country has not only failed in weather forecasting and disaster-preparedness, it has also made a mess of its city planning and public works.

The breakdown in flood control and public works is striking given that the metropolis has been on a public works binge since the start of the year because of the 2013 elections. Despite the school resumption and the onset of the rainy season, many of the projects remain unfinished, compounding the woes of motorists and commuters. We wonder how the public can benefit from expensive (and much delayed) refurbishing of roads when these can hardly be used during the rainy season because flood control doesn't work.

The government has embarked on expensive projects to widen roads and build flyovers without rhyme or reason. But it cannot seem to properly maintain existing roads and enforce zoning regulations and other laws. City halls still allow barangays to build basketball courts on streets, even to transform town plazas into ugly covered courts. Public parks and open spaces have been debased of their worth; they don't anymore provide spaces where people can feel themselves a community.

It's quite embarrassing that our metropolitan mess was exposed during the visit of Spain's Queen Sofia. It is, after all, Spain that laid the framework for human settlements in the Philippines, her former colony.

The 17th-century Ley de las Indias (Law of the Indies) of King Philip II specified how new cities in the Spanish empire were to be laid out, with streets and civic buildings in consonance with the natural terrain, so that the position of the sun was taken into account and drainage was designed to flow naturally into nearby bodies of water. Most Philippine towns were planned on such precepts, providing a rectilinear checkerboard of streets arranged around a central plaza, as seen in Intramuros, Vigan, and old Cebu.

Because riverine Manila was built on marsh land, the Spaniards distributed the districts around Pasig River and its tributaries ("esteros"), which provided not only natural drainage to Manila Bay but also an interconnecting system of navigable waterways that serviced city dwellers.

What has happened since Madre España left? In the name of development, estero banks were cemented over. Nature's capacity for water absorption was lost. Ultimately, esteros were completely covered. Once-open public land, including grassy neighborhood parks, was concreted. Planting strips along sidewalks were removed. Trees were felled for road expansion. Open areas where water once naturally drained into the ground, vanished. Meanwhile, laws to protect forests are ill-enforced. Depleted, the forests dump their eroded soil and waters on cities and settlements. The result: Metro Manila wallowing in its own mess.

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