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Headline: Spotlight on PH at world meeting on disaster risks

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Rescuers ferry stranded residents from their houses due to floods caused by Typhoon Ondoy along Ortigas in Cainta Rizal. INQUIRER FILE PHOTO

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SENDAI, Japan—"Disaster risks are everybody's business."

With Japan's Emperor Akihito and Empress Michiko, the five-day World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (WCDRR) opened on Saturday with this remark from the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the conference coordinating body, in this northeastern Japanese city still recovering from the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011.

On that day, Sendai and neighboring coastal areas were hit by the most powerful quake ever recorded in this north Asian country, along with a tsunami of a magnitude seen only once in a thousand years, leaving thousands of people dead or missing in the Tohoku region.

Several members of the Philippine delegation have roles as panelists and speakers—a recognition of the country's leadership and prominence in the field of disaster risk reduction and management.

Apart from this, the Philippines will also open an exhibit of its best practices for disaster risk reduction and management including the experiences and lessons learned from the effects of Supertyphoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan) that hit Central Visayas in 2013.

New framework

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe welcomed the 7,000-plus delegates to the event, which aims to adopt the successor to the 2005 Hyogo Framework of Action (HFA) agreement on disaster risk reduction (DRR) negotiated 10 years ago. The event will run until March 18.

The HFA is a 10-year plan of action to make the world safer from natural hazards, to which the Philippines is a signatory. It explains, describes and details the work required from all different sectors and actors to reduce disaster losses.

Its goal since 2005 is to substantially reduce disaster losses in 10 years by building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters.

Most, if not all of the 193 UN member-countries—including the Philippines—are represented in the conference.

Soliman, Legarda head PH delegates

The Philippine delegation is jointly headed by Social Welfare Secretary Dinky Soliman and Sen. Loren Legarda, UN champion on DRR for Asia Pacific, who was tasked to deliver the country's statement on DRR on behalf of President Aquino.

They were joined by National Disaster and Risk Reduction executive director Alexander Pama, also Office of Civil Defense head, Public Works and Highways Secretary Rogelio Singson, National Economic and Development Authority head Arsenio Balisacan, Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology director Renato Solidum and Representatives Rufus Rodriguez (Cagayan de Oro) and Mel Senen Sarmiento (Western Samar), among others.

The delegation also includes partners from civil society who are members of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council.

Philippine plea

Members of the Philippine delegation are pushing for a new global framework that will manage disaster risks in vulnerable communities such as the Philippines. They will actively take part in the negotiations on the new framework.

"The new priority action framework for DRR must address the growing risks present in countries, especially in vulnerable communities," Legarda said upon her arrival in Japan.

"Our concern now is how to effectively reduce disaster risk as it becomes more complex given the increasing frequency, intensity and uncertainty of extreme hazard events. We need to rethink approaches for DRR and sustainable development," she said.

Legarda will cochair with Sanae Takaichi, minister of Internal Affairs of Japan, the high-level dialogue on women in disaster risk reduction. The delegation will also attend important ministerial round tables, working sessions, dialogues and public forum events.

In a statement, the Geneva-based UN agency said the post-2015 DRR framework "will provide a formula for reducing the level of existing risks and preventing the creation of new ones."

It will be "forward-looking and action-oriented as requested by the UN General Assembly, centered on proven actions which delivered results, reducing further the loss of lives from disaster events and preventing economic losses."

"The new framework will apply to the risks of small- and large-scale, frequent and infrequent, sudden and slow onset disasters caused by natural or man-made disasters, as well as related environmental, technological and biological hazards and risks," it said.

The WCDRR "will encourage both public and private investment strategies to shift from reactive to proactive approaches that manage disaster risks. This will reduce the vulnerability and exposure of people and assets to natural hazards."

Both the conference and the new framework "will recognize the central role of the private sector in reducing disaster risks. Private investment largely determines disaster risks in most economies worldwide."

Global sustainability

In a statement, Ban Ki-moon said the course toward global sustainability "will definitely start in Sendai for three major reasons—disaster risk reduction inherently involves forward planning; investments in this area advance both sustainable development and climate action; and the vision

for development and climate action is a universal one.”

“We are working for a life of dignity for all,” he said. “That means helping the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries to manage disaster risks. When we do that, we honor our pledge to leave no one behind.”

Low-income countries

He noted that low-income countries were almost always hit the hardest by disasters and risked losing five times as much of their building stock as richer countries, stressing the “staggering price tag” adversely affected the ability of governments to provide basic services to their already vulnerable citizens.

“Sustainability starts in Sendai and continues in Addis (Ababa), New York and Paris. This is our journey to reach a life of dignity for all,” he said.

For her part, Margareta Wahlström, Ban’s special representative on disaster risk reduction and head of the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, warned that if risk reduction is not addressed, expect future losses from disasters to increase “and this will impact countries’ capacity to invest in other areas, such as education and health.”

Involving women actively

Wahlström, who has repeatedly cited the Philippines for its DRR initiatives, said “if we do not take the necessary measures now, it will be difficult to achieve development, let alone sustainable development.”

According to Legarda, one of the UN agency’s 12 DRR champions worldwide, women should have a greater role in programs addressing and mitigating the effects of disasters.

To get them more involved, the factors that foment inequality should be addressed, said Legarda.

“In the face of increasing disaster and climate risks, national and local development processes must involve women actively. Stereotyped gender roles have no place in the critical fight against disaster risk and climate change,” Legarda said in her opening remarks at one of the conference dialogues.

Legarda, who chaired the High Level Multi-Stakeholder Partnership Dialogue Mobilizing Women’s Leadership in Disaster Risk Reduction, said that while everybody is affected during disasters, women face greater risks.

During the 2004 Asian tsunami, 70 percent of those who died in Aceh, Indonesia, and parts of India were women, she noted. More women than men also perished during the 2003 European heat wave and during the onslaught of Hurricane “Katrina” in New Orleans.

“Even after disasters, women are at greater risk—pregnant and lactating women have special needs which are often neglected during disasters; women are more prone to sexual abuse, trafficking and other forms of violence in the aftermath of disasters,” she said.

Given all these, women should become more involved and should be at the forefront of disaster risk reduction efforts, she said.

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