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Headline: 'Hot' zones and global warming

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If in previous years there was "one glass of water evaporating into the atmosphere and then falling as rain," these days, says Secretary Ramon Paje of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, "that one glass of water has turned into a drum of water."

And if "you barely got wet with one glass of water," he tells the Bulong Pulungan sa Sofitel, "you can get drenched if one drum of water is poured on you." And this is precisely what's been happening with our climate and atmosphere. Because of climate change, which Paje says is no longer under dispute, the rapidly heating oceans are causing more and more precipitation, creating "storms that have increased in power and ferocity." This, he says succinctly, is undoubtedly "the new normal."

Global warming hits another area of concern for Paje: deforestation and its effect on weather disturbances. "Trees are the first line of defense" against typhoons and tropical storms, says the secretary. "When a typhoon blows in from the Pacific, it hits the slopes of the Sierra Madre and the trees on the mountainside serve to dissipate the force of the typhoon."

But with unmitigated logging, the Philippines is rapidly losing its forest cover and thus its natural protection against destructive storms, Paje says.

It was for this reason, the secretary says, that P-Noy declared a total logging ban early in his term. And the results have been impressive. From 197 illegal logging "hot spots" in provinces like Isabela, Surigao, Agusan and Davao, he says the number of hot spots has fallen to 31, and operations against these remaining illegal logging operations continue. In a single case in Isabela alone, Paje notes, 42 have been convicted, adding to the 97 convictions attained during the Aquino administration.

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THE trouble is, says the DENR chief, the "No. 1 culprit" in tree-cutting in these parts is the government itself, with power companies and the Department of Public Works and Highways being the top tree-cutters.

Speaking of the uproar raised over the cutting of narra trees in Pangasinan to make way for road widening, Paje says wryly that it seems to be a case of "roads vs. trees." However, some experts, such as planner Jun Palafox, have suggested that a way around that dilemma could be to "carve out another road to spare the trees along the existing road way."

Another step to take, suggests the secretary, is for environmentalists and concerned groups to scrutinize the plans and budgets of local governments and the DPWH and raise objections before funds are allotted for road widening and similar projects. "Once the budget for a road-widening project is approved, can the DENR stop it?"

All these are part of what Paje calls the imperative to "balance development with environmental concerns." And part of seeking this balance is for the government itself to step into the vacuum created by overzealous and greedy loggers. As part of national reforestation efforts, he says, his

department has embarked on projects that cover 1.5 million hectares, with the planting of 1.5 billion seedlings. The goal was set six years ago, says Paje, and they are nearing the one million mark today.

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IN AN interview with CNBC, Richard Preston, author of “The Hot Zone,” a nonfiction thriller about an outbreak of the “Ebola-Reston” virus in the United States some 20 years ago (and where the Philippines played a cameo role), warns that the “fast-mutating” Ebola virus could evolve into a hardier, faster-moving version of itself.

Preston, who has returned to covering Ebola since this latest outbreak, recalled on CNBC’s “Squawk Box” a conversation he had with a scientist working on Ebola containment. “One of the scientists said to me, ‘Can zebras learn how to fly?’ Not too likely. A better question to ask is ‘Can zebras learn how to run faster?’ That is something that Ebola could learn to do, so to speak, as it multiplies in humans.”

So while one can get infected with Ebola only through direct contact with the body fluids of infected persons, the virus, said Preston, “could grow to higher concentrations in human blood, or paradoxically, it could become less fatal in humans.”

This, it seems, has a good news/bad news aspect: While today the virus has about a 50-percent fatality rate (according to the World Health organization), that rate could conceivably be reduced to as low as 20 percent, but then “more people would be sick with Ebola who could move around longer and potentially spread the virus to more people.”

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WHILE his book chronicled the first “sightings” of Ebola in primates and humans, Preston, in an interview with the New York Times, said his understanding of the virus and of the disease had “changed a great deal.”

Noting the virus’ ability to mutate and “learn” as it moves through the human population, Preston said a major concern now is that “all of our drugs and tests and vaccines for Ebola need to be adjusted.” He added: “We can adjust the tests, but we need to watch how the virus is doing... We now have the ability to use genetic sequencing machines to read the code of the virus again and again... We now have our eyes on the enemy.”

Preston said he is “dying to update the book,” and one of the details he wishes he could rewrite (and one which I particularly remember) is a “description of a nurse weeping tears of blood. That almost certainly didn’t happen. When a person has Ebola, the eyes can turn brilliant red from blood vessels leaking and blood oozing out of the eyelid. That’s horrifying, but it’s not someone with tears of blood running down their face. I want to fix that.”

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Here’s hoping that’s the only horrifying detail that needs correcting in the context of today’s Ebola outbreak.