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Headline: Overlooked 'key word'

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"Survival" is the key word in the kilometeric title of Republic Act 10171. It authorizes President Aquino to sign a check, up to P1 billion annually, to ward off weather gone out of whack.

The "People's Survival Fund Law" was sidelined by headlines on Secretary Jesse Robredo's death. That is understandable. Robredo towered amidst today's moral pygmies. "Here was a Caesar!" a Shakespeare play says, "Whence comes such another?"

Unprecedented weather changes pose life or death issues. Typhoons or "bagyo" here are of increasing severity. Many were washed away to sea when Tropical Storm "Sendong" corkscrewed its way into northern Mindanao. A final death count was not possible.

The term "bagyo" goes back to 1911. A storm dumped what was then a record rainfall of 46 inches within a 24-hour period on Baguio City. In contrast, 10 hours of Sendong's torrential rains saw floodwaters rise by 11 feet in less than an hour.

RA 10171's title is a mouthful: "An Act Establishing The People's Survival Fund To Provide Long-term Finance Streams To Enable The Government To Effectively Address The Problem Of Climate Change, Amending For The Purpose Republic Act No. 9729, Otherwise Known as the 'Climate Change Act of 2009' And For Other Purposes."

The new law is useful, albeit the first response to growing clamor for action. Show urgency in dealing with climate change, the World Bank urged back in April 27 last year. The World Bank reiterated an offer of \$250 million to help "better handle extreme weather conditions" and develop clean energy sources.

Stronger typhoons, rising sea levels and an increase in global temperature loom ahead, Andrew Steer, World Bank special envoy for climate change, warned. "The real challenge of the Philippines, and it's important that citizens are aware... that over the coming decades, unless the world takes tougher action, certain things will happen that are not good."

In 2010, the "Climate Change Vulnerability Index" produced by Maplecroft, a risk analysis firm, identified 16 countries as being at extreme risk. Aside from the Philippines, the other countries threatened were Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Burma (Myanmar), Nepal and Pakistan.

"Climate change affects everyone," Carola Donner-Reichle of the Asian Development Bank cautions. "But it does not affect everyone equally. There is a need to mitigate the social and economic impact of climate change, particularly on the poor and most vulnerable."

But is time less than helpful for the survival law? Look at these new scientific reports. Efforts to stop global temperatures are now "unrealistic," admits professor Sir Bob Watson of Britain. He used to chair the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and served as senior adviser to former Vice President Al Gore.

"I look back to the summits at Copenhagen, Cancun and Durban and, to be quite candid, conclude: Any hope of tamping down average temperature rise to 2C is out the window." Will the temperature rise as high as 5C? The consequences will be dire. The impact on human health, the availability of food and water, the loss of coastlines will become progressively worse as the average temperature of the planet rises.

The 2C target was agreed on at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in 2010. Most countries preferred a lower target of 1.5C. That proved wishful thinking. A number of analyses have concluded that the 2C target would be missed. The most recent was that of the International Energy Agency earlier this year.

"Trees fail to flower," Aetas huddled at the Bataan mountaintop meeting told Fr. Shay Cullen. "Bees are disappearing. Storms blow away our nipa huts as never before."

The Aetas echo what scientists elsewhere note. Large numbers of bats that pollinate plants are threatened, says the Mammal Review. At the University of Bern, experiments of 1,634 plant species show "Spring flowering and leafing advances 5 to 6 days per year for every degree Celsius of warming," the journal Nature reports. The additional water needed by a plant community that sprouts a week earlier is staggering.

Only 4 percent of the coral reefs here remain in pristine condition. Other countries with equally threatened reefs are: Haiti, Grenada, Comoros, Vanuatu, Tanzania, Kiribati, Fiji and Indonesia.

"Accelerated" changes include the melting of Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets. Here "expect sea waters to rise by at least 20 centimeters in the next 40 years," estimates Dr. Wendy Clavano of the Environmental Science for Social Change, a Jesuit research organization.

The severest threat stretches "along the Pacific seaboard: from Samar all the way down to eastern Mindanao." Include the Zamboangas, and the island provinces of Romblon and Marinduque in the Sibuyan, says Clavano, a PhD holder from Cornell University.

Create a "vulnerability index." This could undergird mitigation programs for what initial data pinpoint as high-risk areas. That sweeps in Lingayen Gulf (La Union and Pangasinan), Lamon Bay (Quezon and Camarines Norte), Camotes Sea (western Leyte, northern Bohol, and northeastern Cebu).

Add to that list Guimaras Strait (along northwestern Negros Occidental and Guimaras), central Sulu Sea (Cuyo Archipelago), Iligan Bay (in particular Misamis Occidental), Zamboanga del Norte, and Bislig Bay (Surigao del Sur).

Any tool to help sharpen awareness would be welcome. For now, most local officials assume that tomorrow will be another today. We overlook "key words" like "survival" at our peril, the late Jesse Robredo would have told us.

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