

Headline: Shattering mindsets

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"Chance favors the prepared mind," scientist Louis Pasteur taught. Many were unprepared for Tropical Storm "Sendong" and Typhoon "Pablo." Sendong's death toll topped 1,450. That made it the "world's deadliest storm in 2011." A year later, Pablo proved the "world's deadliest," notes Global Catastrophe Recap. It left 1,901 dead plus P37 billion in damages.

Jitters eased Sunday when tropical depression "Bising" swerved northwest. Storm signals for Bicol and Samar were lowered. "Bising could exit the Philippine area of responsibility Tuesday," Pagasa forecast.

This breathing space enables us to grapple with festering questions. "How do we explain the decreasing number of years in the occurrence of destructive typhoons affecting southern Philippines?" marine scientist and Magsaysay Awardee Angel Alcala asks in Metro Post of Dumaguete. On average, a storm slices through southern Philippines every 12 years.

"Pablo followed Sendong after less than a year," he notes. Typhoon "Ruping" occurred seven years after Typhoon "Nitang." "Frank" occurred 17 years after Ruping. Since the 1980s, typhoons hitting the country, below the 10-degree latitude, seem to be increasing in frequency at year's end.

Most typhoons careen on a beaten northward track. This gave Mindanao a patina of storm immunity. Sendong's torrential rains, however, caused floods to rise by 11 feet in an hour. Illegal logging and squatting on waterways were major culprits.

"The real challenge for the Philippines over the coming decade, unless the world takes tougher action, is certain things will happen that are not good," warned World Bank special envoy for climate change Andrew Steer. Stronger typhoons and an increase in global temperature loom ahead.

Rises in sea levels by 0.5-1 meter by 2100 could affect cities in the Philippines, among others. We're one of 16 countries pinpointed "at extreme risk" by the Climate Change Vulnerability Index produced by risk analysis firm Maplecroft.

"The question about climate change is no longer whether it's real," World Bank president Jim Yong-kim says. "(It) is what the world is going to look like for our children. I have a 3-year-old son. And when he is my age, he could be living in a world completely different from ours."

Kim makes that point in the bank report "Turn Down The Heat." Current efforts to tamp down global warming below a 2-degree-Celsius increase are faltering, it says. A 4-degree-Celsius hotter world will wreak havoc everywhere. "Things can get ugly fast."

Australian firefighters this week were tamping down more than 100 bushfires. These gutted houses and thousands of hectares of land in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. "Climate change is increasing the risk of more frequent and longer heat waves, as well as exacerbating bushfire conditions," the Australian Climate Commission said.

We've seen photos of death and devastation—from bloated corpses to ripped-up homes and farms—in Davao Oriental and Compostela Valley. Alcala provides an insight into the havoc a few

have noticed because coral reefs are underwater. Sendong and Pablo “decimated the hard corals of Apo Marine Reserve and other reefs in southeastern Negros,” he says. “These marine reserves had hardly begun to recover from devastation by Sendong when it was hit again by Pablo. It is uncertain whether the Apo and Dauin (Negros Oriental) reefs will ever recover to its previous state before 2011, should weather trends continue in the future.

“Low-latitude typhoons destroy the coral reefs along their paths. Typhoon Nitang in 1984 wrecked reefs in the Central Visayas, notably Sumilon Island Reef and Pescador Island Reef off western Cebu Island. Typhoon Ruping, in 1990, destroyed Sagay and Catarman reefs Typhoon Frank devastated coral reefs in Bantayan Island, off northern Cebu Island in 2008.

“Typhoon ‘Pablo’ has the distinction of killing hard corals and hundreds of giant clams in the Cantaan Giant Clam Sanctuary ... in addition to reducing live coral cover on Camiguin reefs. These records are only those observed or were reliably reported to us. Many more affected reefs in the Bohol Sea, for example, probably have remained unreported.

“(What) is of greater concern is the effect of supertyphoons on the biodiversity, including fishery species, of southern Philippine reefs.” Alcala explains the context: “More coral species and possibly fish species occur in southern than in northern Philippines. The economic value of coral reef biodiversity in southern Philippines exceeds that in northern Philippines. The surge of destructive typhoons in the southern part of the country is frightening because we stand to lose the sources of sea food on which many coastal communities depend.”

Republic Act No. 10171 authorizes President Aquino to sign checks, up to P1 billion annually, to underwrite projects to (a) beef up disaster response; and, more important, (b) spur especially local governments—addicted to pork barrel—to mitigate the effects of climate change.

Singapore mandates, for example, low water use in showers and loos, plus higher tariffs to curb water use. Other measures, include green growth, factoring in the value of environment into economic decisions and the increasing share of renewable power.

Politicians must first endorse these policies. Then, they need “to sell them on the basis of benefits they create for their people, not just for the planet.” Such reforms call for overhaul of mindsets. As Henry V says in a Shakespearean play: “All things are ready / If your mind be so.”

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