

Headline: The water towers of Asia

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KATHMANDU, Nepal — As our plane made its final approach to Kathmandu international airport, I was awed by the Himalayan mountain ranges that filled the windows on both sides of the plane. It was a reminder that the country is host to eight of the 10 tallest mountain peaks of the world, including Mount Everest, of course.

Nepal conjures images of mountain tranquility and peace, and indeed it is such a place. Perhaps even more importantly, the Himalayas are also called the water towers of Asia. Melting ice from these mountains provides life-giving water to close to two billion people, which is most of continental Asia.

But as the meeting of IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) scientists began on July 15, that image was shattered by the looming crisis of climate change. What is happening to the mountains of Nepal will affect more than their country. As mountain glaciers shrink because of warming temperatures, the water supply of two billion people is at tremendous risk. Water scarcity is already straining relationships between South Asian nations. As the planet warms, conflicts over water resources may escalate to the point of actual shooting wars. Loss of Himalayan ice and snow will also have cascading effects on global sea-level rise, resulting in submerged coastlines on the megadeltas of Asia, hundreds of millions of environmental migrants and loss of agricultural lands due to rising coastal and riverine salinity levels.

In his speech to open the IPCC meeting, Nepal Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli highlighted the risks his country is facing because of a warming planet. I was struck by the sincerity of his tone as he narrated the ways in which his country was being battered as the planet's climate gyrates toward an uncertain future.

When we arrived, the monsoon rains had just started falling, which was good news for farmers because the rains were a couple of weeks late. In fact, Nepali scientists have been observing more erratic weather patterns, as exhibited by the late onset of monsoon rains. In addition, disasters caused by flooding are becoming more common. Scores of people recently died in Nepal because of floods and landslides triggered by the monsoon rains.

So what of it to us? Indirectly, the Himalayas and Tibetan Plateau greatly influence the global circulation that affects our weather and climate systems. Also, the Mekong River, which is fed by the waters from the Himalayas and which provides irrigation to rice-producing countries from which we import rice, is reportedly at its lowest level in 100 years.

The struggles of Nepal and surrounding nations remind us that we share a common fate with the rest of humanity. The manifestations may differ, but all of us will be affected by the planet's rapidly warming climate.

In addition, addressing climate change cannot be done by one or a few countries acting on their own. The nations of the world must band together to keep greenhouse gas emissions down. At the same time, vulnerable sectors and communities must be capacitated to live and prosper in this heating world.

As I headed toward the airport to fly back to Manila, black clouds were gathering again over Kathmandu, the weather uncertain. A premonition of things to come for our planet?

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Dr. Rodel Lasco is an author of several IPCC reports, including the forthcoming sixth assessment report. He is the executive director of The OML Center, a foundation devoted to discovering climate change adaptation solutions (<https://www.omlopezcenter.org/>).

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