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Headline: Why climate change is a human rights issue

Byline: Zelda DT Soriano

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Renato “Ka Rene” Bornilla, the president of Block 456 Homeowners Association in Barangay Nangka, Marikina, and a labor union organizer of the Workers for People’s Liberation, was restless on the night of May 10, his eyes red and sad. He was obviously in pain, but insisted that we take his statement as a witness for the human rights and climate change investigation by the Commission on Human Rights.

In his native tongue, he recalled what he and his family went through during and after Tropical Storm “Ondoy” in 2009. “When I got home, it was as if heaven and earth fell upon me. Every little thing I saved up for was destroyed!”

Then, reflecting on the role that fossil-fuel and carbon-producing companies have in the climate change that, according to scientists, is bringing about more extreme storms like Ondoy, Bornilla said: “There are other sources of energy, but all these companies want is profit. If the environment is destroyed, it isn’t they who are affected since they’re safe inside their rich, gated subdivisions. The vulnerable ones are us, the poor.”

Bornilla also asked his wife, neighbors and friends to recount their experiences when Ondoy brought extreme rainfall and inundated their entire village in a matter of hours.

The following night, Bornilla passed away from a respiratory disease. But his words have become part of an important, novel investigation that can change not only the Philippines, but the world.

The Philippine Commission on Human Rights is investigating the responsibility of carbon-producing companies in inflicting possible harm on people’s basic human rights with their business practices. This is the world’s first national human rights investigation of its kind, triggered in 2015 by a petition from 14 environmental, human rights, consumers’ welfare and other people’s organizations, along with 18 Filipino farmers, fisherfolk, human rights advocates, typhoon survivors, artists and concerned citizens.

The rights of Filipino citizens to life, food, shelter, clean water and sanitation, livelihood, self-determination and development are heavily affected by climate change, especially in poor and vulnerable communities. In the first public hearing last March, witnesses from the transport sector and the farming, fishing and indigenous communities testified how their lives have been changed by global warming and environmental destruction, including losing loved ones, friends and neighbors, family and cultural traditions, education and opportunities for a better life.

Their testimonies showed that climate change is a concern not just of governments, scientists, businesses and advocates, but also, and more urgently, of those in the economic front lines—farmers, fishermen and common folk.

The unabated extraction and sale of coal, oil and gas releases massive carbon dioxide into the earth’s atmosphere, altering nature’s processes. Seas rise as the planet’s temperature rises, leading to hotter days and nights, more destructive typhoons and other weather patterns, and scarcer crops and fish. The future becomes uncertain for many.

CHR is holding its second public hearing on the issue this week. The petitioners will present evidence and information to show that certain identified companies continue to engage in harmful business practices, and may have also actively undermined climate change science and action by obscuring the truth about it.

Despite their capacity and resources to prevent, remedy and address the harm being wrought on the environment, these corporations have failed to do what is right and just. In demanding that these corporations and their home countries reform their practices and cut their carbon emissions, the petitioners are asking that they align their business models with climate change science and the global commitment to phase out fossil fuels.

This investigation is already changing the dynamics in the Philippines. It is educating the public on climate change and its relation to basic human rights. It is moving people to action, while also calling fossil-fuel companies to account. The CHR's probe may yet change the Philippines and the world.

The statements of petitioners' witnesses and resource persons this week are dedicated to Ka Rene Bornilla. His voice will not fade away.

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Lawyer Zelda dT Soriano is the legal and political advisor of Greenpeace Southeast Asia.