

Headline: Aquino: Climate shocks kill 50,000 a year

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President Benigno Aquino delivers a speech at the COP 21 United Nations conference on climate change, on November 30, 2015 at Le Bourget, on the outskirts of the French capital Paris. More than 150 world leaders are meeting under heightened security, for the 21st Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP21/CMP11), also known as “Paris 2015” from November 30 to December 11. AFP

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PARIS—In his keynote address at one of the six high-level side events held on the first day of the climate change talks in Le Bourget, just outside this city, President Aquino drew a stark picture of the already serious effects of global warming on climate-vulnerable countries.

Speaking to fellow members of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, of which he was chair, he emphasized that “since 2010, in the CVF member countries, an average of more than 50,000 deaths have occurred every year due to climate shocks.”

The Forum currently has 20 members, namely Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Barbados, Bhutan, Costa Rica, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Kiribati, Madagascar, Maldives, Nepal, Philippines, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, Tanzania, Timor-Leste, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Vietnam.

Mr. Aquino offered another startling statistic: “By some estimates, annual losses amount to at least 2.5 percent of GDP for us in the CVF—this, despite the fact that we collectively contribute less than 2 percent of current greenhouse gas emissions.”

He called on the parties under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change— a total of 195 countries plus the European Union as a distinct entity—to approve a climate treaty that will treat the 20 CVF countries and other countries at risk justly. “Fairness and equitability are not mere catchwords for the vulnerable,” he said. “They form the very foundations of a truly global climate response.

The full text of President Aquino’s keynote speech at the high-level meeting of the Climate Vulnerable Forum, conducted on the first day of COP21, follows:

Allow me to first of all convey to the citizens of France the deepest sympathies of my people for the tragedy that beset Paris last November 13. I echo the solidarity of the rest of the world in saying that no amount of effort from the forces of darkness can ever make the lights of Paris dim.

Colleagues, in the Philippines, there are only two seasons: wet, and dry. The monsoon season has historically ended by October. Over the past few years, however, the most destructive typhoons have come in November and December—an especially discouraging phenomenon, because it dampens the joyousness of the Christmas season, which is among the most important celebrations

in a predominantly Christian nation such as ours.

In this, our country is not an isolated case. Those of us who compose this Forum, and many others who are also exposed to a high concentration of risk, experience climate change in the starkest possible terms. For example, since 2010, in the CVF member countries, an average of more than 50,000 deaths have occurred every year due to climate shocks. Up to 40 million people may potentially be displaced due to rising sea levels, which threaten to engulf entire nations in the Pacific.

Even beyond such phenomena, we are all aware of how the discourse on development and inequality, within and among nations, is intertwined with climate change. Invariably, those who have the least bear most of the burden. While developing nations such as ours have been, by necessity, getting better at saving lives, the farmlands that evacuees leave behind become washed away by stronger typhoons; businesses are shuttered, stunting economic activity. Funds that could otherwise be used for other development needs and services are channeled towards the costly efforts involving relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. By some estimates, annual losses amount to at least 2.5 percent of GDP for us in the CVF—this, despite the fact that we collectively contribute less than 2 percent of current greenhouse gas emissions.

We have all echoed the call for global solidarity in responding to climate change. Our gathering today, and the hard work that our representatives have been doing since the Climate Vulnerable Forum came into being, highlights an essential pillar of the solidarity we are pursuing: Fairness and equitability are not mere catchwords for the vulnerable; they form the very foundations of a truly global climate response. Our friend President Hollande and I have outlined as much in the Manila Call to Action on Climate Change, urging not only climate action, but also climate justice, cooperation, and solidarity in the financial and technological aspects of climate response.

Colleagues, we have all probably noticed how climate change discourse has so far taken shape. The focus of many debates seem to be on who should be doing what. We believe, however, that the question is not about who among us should be doing what; the question is not about the contributions of individual countries. It is imperative that all countries do everything, and maximize what can be done to address climate change. Either we all strive and sacrifice, or we all lose to the cycle of destruction and reconstruction.

I ask you to picture a situation that has become all too common in the Philippines. After typhoon Bopha in 2012, I had the opportunity to conduct aerial assessments of provinces where coconuts are the main source of livelihood. As far as the eye could see, not a tree was left standing. I note that it takes 5 to 7 years for a coconut tree to grow to maturity. What will the people do to survive in the meantime? We had to innovate by promoting intercropping, to ensure that communities will have other sources of livelihood to sustain our farmers until the new coconut trees reach maturity.

So many talk of resilience being one of my people's highest attributes. We have been able to build back better even after the most devastating storms, for example by moving entire communities away from hazardous areas. But building back better has become less and less of a guarantee, given that the new normal might still be replaced by an even newer normal if we fail to act in concert. Positive national development trajectories, especially of emerging economies such as the Philippines', can be broken due to the disruption caused by disaster. After all, what if we could channel the resources used for building back better towards other development interventions?

By now, the truth should be evident to all: No amount of effort, however gargantuan, by a single nation can ever be enough to address climate change in its entirety. In the Philippines, we have been implementing an ambitious national greening program, and have cracked down heavily on illegal logging and other unsustainable environmental practices. We have worked to diversify our energy resources, increasingly tapping into renewables such as solar, wind, biomass, hydro, and geothermal power. Government scientists have been conducting research towards more

disaster-resilient crops, and we have continuously been upgrading our weather forecasting capabilities. We are willing and ready to share with you all the knowledge and best practices that we have learned from our experience. Despite this, much remains to be done in terms of creating a fully climate-proof Philippines—and I suspect it is the same for most, if not all, of our brother nations in the CVF.

In the Philippines, we have as one of our core philosophies the idea of “bayanihan.” Loosely translated, it means communal action borne of communal responsibility. Back home, we have been harnessing the energies of bayanihan towards national transformation: In instituting good governance, in engaging the engines of economic growth, and in creating a more compassionate and inclusive society. We have called on the spirit of bayanihan to lift up our countrymen during every storm that has made landfall within our islands.

This spirit of bayanihan, dear colleagues, is exactly the same spirit that informs the Climate Vulnerable Forum. It is also at the core of what we launch today: the Manila-Paris Declaration, which embodies our shared aspirations for a world that is more just and more sustainable. Individually, we are already survivors; collectively, we are a force towards a fairer, more climate-proactive world. Many of us have already been taking pioneering action, particularly in terms of climate finance. Let us not only enhance and intensify such work, but also fully leverage our solidarity in ensuring that the remaining barriers towards concerted action and knowledge sharing are broken down—so that we may in turn link arms and march on together towards a more resilient, more inclusive future.

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