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Government officials have warned the people to brace themselves for more devastating storms, flooding and drought unless policies and programs are adopted to mitigate climate change. Science and Technology Undersecretary Graciano Yumul, for one, said that in the next 20 to 50 years the dry seasons would be drier and the wet seasons wetter.

We have seen evidence of what officials have been warning us against. Storm "Ondoy" was one of the first to shock us into the realization that storms are getting fiercer, that rains are getting stronger and that flood levels are becoming higher, in some places reaching the second story of houses and forcing people and animals to perch on rooftops and trees to save their lives. Now Typhoon "Pedring" has caused similar death and destruction two years almost to the day after Ondoy.

The recent abnormal weather occurrences should prod both the government and the private sector to take steps to mitigate, if not avoid, the huge losses in lives and property in the coming years.

One program that should be undertaken immediately is a massive, nationwide reforestation program to replace the forest cover that has been stripped almost bare by illegal loggers, commercial loggers, kaingin farmers and other destructive people and groups. The Philippines is one of the countries that is losing its forest cover fast, and now ranks fourth among the world's top 10 most threatened forest hotspots.

If the deforestation rate of 157,400 hectares per year continues, the remaining forest cover will be destroyed in less than 40 years. Floods and landslides that cause great loss of lives, property and sources of livelihood are the most destructive effects of deforestation. Deforestation has to be stopped and a large-scale reforestation program undertaken.

Ondoy and Pedring have also pointed up the need for reexamining the protocol for the release of water from dams. For instance, Virgilio Garcia, dam operations manager of the National Power Corp., said the spillway gates of San Roque would be opened under four conditions: (1) when the reservoir elevation reaches 280 meters above seal level, (2) when there is a typhoon, (3) when the water entering the reservoir is 500 cubic meters per second or more and when rainfall is 60 millimeters or more in one day.

But Nicanor Melecio, chair of the Pangasinan Institute for Land and Aquatic Research, said: "The protocol is reactionary and does not consider the meteorological and hydrological forecast, especially the rainfall duration which normally precedes and follows the passing eye of the typhoon."

He asked if water should not be released at the earliest if the rainfall forecast is more than four days and the rainfall density is forecast to rise by 60 mm per day or more.

For his part, a Bulacan-born dam safety engineer (who asked that his name be withheld) said in a comment carried by GMA News Online that he found it hard to believe that there is no agency in the Philippines that has the authority to manage the safety of dams. In the United States, he said, dams are regulated by state and federal governments and if any dam has the potential to cause any danger to the public, mandatory actions are taken to eliminate the potential risk. If it is true that

there is no agency here that manages the safety of dams, then it's high time one was designated or established. The management of dams is too important a matter to be left to ad hoc measures and decisions.

One of the lessons of Ondoy was that the government has to acquire more life-saving facilities and equipment like rubber boats, amphibian trucks, and helicopters that can pluck people from rooftops and trees. The Philippine National Police did acquire 75 rubber boats for P131.5 million, but they have never been used because they were paired with the wrong type of engines. They are now unusable, while hundreds of people still wait to be plucked from rooftops in many places in Central Luzon. Can't we do things right for the sake of our people?

We cannot avoid storms, rains and flood which are natural occurrences, but we can do things now that will help mitigate the death and destruction that they cause.

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