

Headline: Not to forget

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The sun was back in Manila by Sunday, dissipating with it any lingering thoughts of the miserable weekend just past, when incessant rain brought about by Typhoon “Nona” once again turned much of the city into a stinking pool, snarling traffic and stranding thousands of commuters in the midst of the holiday shopping frenzy. From now until Dec. 25, the weather bureau says “the whole country will generally have improved weather.” Which means Manila can now resume the last-minute trips to the supermarket and shopping mall before Christmas Day, largely unimpeded by rain.

But the sunny weather should not blind us from having to spare a thought for, and extend a hand to, our countrymen in many other parts of the Philippines that have borne the brunt of Nona and its companion, Tropical Depression “Onyok,” the combined force of which continues to dump heavy rainfall across the archipelago. While the fatalities remained low compared to previous typhoons—45 as of Sunday, according to disaster monitoring officials—the damage to infrastructure is now estimated at P2 billion, with about 89 percent of that coming from a heavily battered agriculture sector.

Nearly 170,000 houses were also damaged or destroyed in a wide swath of the country—Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Bicol, Eastern Visayas, the Mimaropa (Mindoro Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan) region, all the way to Davao in the south where flooding has reportedly submerged homes and farms in Compostela Valley—and the threat of landslides has displaced more than a thousand families from their homes. The typhoon is also said to have damaged 35 hospitals—28 in Eastern Visayas and seven in Bicol; rendered 26 roads and four bridges impassable in the aforementioned affected areas plus the Cordillera Administrative Region; and flooded 67 barangays in Bulacan, Nueva Ecija, Aurora and other parts of Central Luzon.

Despite the warm weather predicted ahead for Metro Manila, residents of many coastal villages in Pampanga and Bulacan may end up spending Christmas huddled in evacuation centers or taking shelter above dikes, with lingering flooding still projected in many towns. More than 54,000 residents are packed in government evacuation centers in Central Luzon at this moment, waiting for the waters to drain out of their villages before they can resume their lives. Extensive damage has also been reported in Bicol and neighboring provinces—Albay and Sorsogon, plus Northern Samar and Romblon.

In the face of such widespread devastation, President Aquino has declared a state of national calamity “to hasten recovery, relief and rehabilitation efforts of the government and the private sector, including any international humanitarian assistance.” However, it looks unlikely that any forthcoming international aid at this time would approach even a fraction of the massive resources the world community poured into the Philippines, specifically the Visayas region, in the wake of Supertyphoon “Yolanda” two years ago. Nona, while proving to be a destructive typhoon in its own right, is not on the same headline-grabbing category as Yolanda, and therefore the response to it has been more muted, even now with reports of its widespread damage still going up.

Absent the international spotlight, the Philippines will have to shoulder much of Nona’s rehabilitation, and it has to move quick. The devastation couldn’t have come at a worse time for the victims—right in the heart of the Christmas season. Hopefully, by this time, the government has learned its lessons from the manifold blunders and inefficiencies of its post-Yolanda operations, when aid took an obscenely long time to arrive and give relief to survivors. The distribution of goods

was so ineffectually planned that many ended up rotting in warehouses. The rehabilitation process itself, even now, has remained mired in waste, corruption and an astounding lack of urgency.

More than learning piecemeal lessons every time from yet another typhoon, however, whoever succeeds the current administration in next year's elections must make it a priority to craft a more comprehensive, long-term plan for how the Philippines will have to face the prospect of wrenching climate change. With rising waters predicted to affect coastal cities and communities up and down the archipelago, fiercer typhoons whipping out of the Pacific and disrupting agriculture and whole industries, and massive sums needed to gird up the entire country for the changed world up ahead, reactive declarations of national calamity simply will not do anymore.

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