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### **When will the Philippines be prepared for disasters?**

MORE than 10,000 delegates from 194 countries, including the Philippines, gathered in Durban, South Africa, last week for the latest round of talks under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, speaking at the opening of the meeting on December 6, listed four points that he expected to be accomplished by the end of the conference on Friday, namely, the creation of the Green Climate Fund, which channels \$100 billion a year by 2020 to developing countries to help them adapt to the problem; firming up of long-term financing commitments on the \$30-billion fund pledged for developing countries; advancement on the future of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which will expire in 2012, and the adoption of a more robust climate-change agreement that is effective for all countries.

From the start of the meeting, the world's major economies, which are the primary sources of greenhouse gases that harm the atmosphere and have been blamed for the extreme weather disturbances in recent times, could not find a common ground for agreement. The United States, Japan, Russia and Canada refused to sign a new agreement, while China, Brazil, South Africa and the European Union also declined to sign unless the other countries did so first.

The UNFCCC seeks to cut greenhouse-gas emissions by 50 percent by 2050 from 1990 levels to stop the planet from heating up. According to scientists, a 2-degree-Celsius increase in global temperatures will cause extreme weather disturbances that will be disastrous to many countries.

Already, Asian cities are increasingly at risk from rising sea levels and severe droughts, according to the Asian Development Bank. ADB data show that natural disasters in 2010 alone displaced more than 30 million people in the Asia-Pacific region, which includes the Philippines.

The region, which is home to more than 4 billion people, accounted for 34 percent of recorded disasters, 90 percent of people affected, 32 percent of deaths and 33 percent of economic losses worldwide from natural disasters from 2005 to 2010.

Germanwatch, an international think tank focusing on climate and development, says the Philippines is among the 10 countries most vulnerable to severe weather caused by climate change. The country sits on the earthquake-prone Pacific Ring of Fire. It is also on the path of typhoons that form in the western Pacific.

The second-largest volcanic eruption of the 20th century happened in our country when Mount Pinatubo, which had been sleeping for 600 years, suddenly erupted in June 1991, killing at least 800 people and leaving 100,000 homeless. Millions of tons of sulfur dioxide were discharged into the atmosphere, which circled the globe and caused a decrease in worldwide temperature for several years.

In July 16, 1990, an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.8 struck Luzon, killing more than 1,600 people. The earthquake caused a 125-kilometer-long ground rupture that stretched from Aurora in Quezon province to Cuyapo in Nueva Ecija.

Based on data from 1991 to 2010, the Germanwatch says weather-related disasters in the Philippines, which is visited by about 20 storms every year, cause an average of 801 deaths per year and economic losses averaging \$660 million annually.

In late September 2009, we were hit by a disastrous double whammy. Tropical storm Ondoy poured in just six days the equivalent of one month of rain in Metro Manila, submerging at least two-thirds of the metropolis and surrounding areas. Typhoon Pepeng followed a few days later, flooding Central Luzon and destroying thousands of hectares of agricultural crops.

The combined damage from Ondoy and Pepeng was estimated at P50 billion. About 1,000 people died, and hundreds of thousands displaced.

More recently, on September 27, 2011, we saw another “first” in terms of natural disasters. Typhoon Pedring triggered a storm surge, which produced large waves that hammered the coastline of Manila Bay, causing flash floods that rendered Roxas Boulevard impassable the whole day and submerging Mabini, Ermita, Kalaw streets, Taft Avenue, and Ayala Boulevard in above-the-knee water.

Given the long history of disasters that have visited our country, we should have been well prepared to cope with, or minimize the adverse impact of natural calamities.

Apparently, whatever has been put in place in terms of mitigation or adaptation measures is still inadequate. For example, do we have an agency that conducts scenario building? If there is, have we put in place standard operating procedures or SOPs to follow if a certain disaster happens? How do we respond to earthquakes, tsunamis, or back-to-back typhoons? Also, have we looked at development projects that may increase our vulnerability to environmental disasters; for instance, reclamation projects?

We cannot replace the thousands of innocent lives lost to calamities, but we can reduce the number of fatalities with the right response. We spend billions of pesos to rebuild schools and roads destroyed by typhoons, floods and earthquakes, billions that could have been used to build new schools, new roads and additional infrastructure.

Let's not wait for a global agreement to cope with natural disasters. Let us be make our country disaster-prepared, now!

You may send your comments/feedback to [mbv\\_secretariat@yahoo.com](mailto:mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com).

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