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Of Trees and Forest

Disasters As Challengers, Not Excuses

MANILA, Philippines --- The first week of June saw the arrival of the first typhoon in the Philippines this year. Typhoon "Ambo" (international name: "Mawar") was not among the most disastrous weather disturbances to visit our country, but it still left two people dead, five missing, and 16 injured. Property damage has yet to be assessed.

As of this writing, weathermen were watching another brewing storm, which would be named "Butchoy" when it develops into a typhoon and enters Philippine territory.

Fortunately, we have not seen a disastrous volcanic eruption since Mount Pinatubo, which practically shut down the two American military bases in the country. We also have not experienced a massive earthquake like the magnitude 9.0 that hit Japan in March, 2011, triggering a murderous tsunami and a nuclear meltdown.

But we cannot escape the fact that our country is prone to natural disasters. It sits on the typhoon belt in the Pacific Ocean. And it is also located in the so-called "Pacific Rim of Fire" where there are constant risks of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.

The Philippines, according to the Citizens' Disaster Response Center (CDRC), a partner of the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), topped the list of countries most frequently hit by natural disasters in 2011. CDRC cited records from CRED, a World Health Organization collaborating center based in Brussels, Belgium, which showed that of the 302 natural disasters worldwide, 33 hit the Philippines.

These disasters affected more than 15.3 million people and caused more than R26 billion in damage. Of the 1,924 people killed in disasters last year, 1,400 died during the onslaught of typhoon Sendong, one of the worst disasters in the world last year.

With Typhoon "Ambo" gone and Typhoon "Butchoy" just starting, we can expect 18 more typhoons to make up the average 20 that visit our country every year.

Typhoons and other calamities disrupt economic activities, so it's easy to use them as excuses for slow economic growth. The National Economic and Development Authority, for example, estimated that direct and indirect damage from typhoon Sendong alone might have reduced economic growth by 0.115 percentage point last year.

The figure is not insignificant considering that the economy grew by just 3.7 percent in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) last year, less than half the 7.6 percent posted in 2010.

In my view, using disasters as excuses for poor performance of the economy is defeatist. Typhoons and earthquakes should be confronted as challenges and should galvanize our country to move more aggressively to drive growth.

Look at Japan, the world's third largest economy. It is resource-poor so it imports most of the raw materials required by its industries, but it is one of the major industrialized nations in the world today. And, in addition to lack of natural resources, it is also earthquake-prone because it sits on tectonic plates, which constantly cause earthquakes.

It has been a little more than a year since an earthquake and tsunami hit Japan (and triggered a nuclear crisis in several power plants), killing more than 13,000 people, displacing more than 136,000 others, and causing damage estimated at \$309 billion (that's more than 800 times the Philippine government's budget of Php 1.645 trillion in 2011).

A weaker nation would have wallowed in self-pity, but Japan and its people chose to confront the challenges hurled at them. After three years of recession, Japan's GDP grew by 4.1 percent in the first quarter of 2012, an unexpected strong sign of recovery in the wake of last year's disasters.

Singapore is not a disaster-prone country. But, just like Japan, it is also resource-poor. And yet Singaporeans have turned their country into the world's fourth-leading financial center, the world's second-biggest casino gambling market, the world's third-largest oil refining center, and the busiest trans-shipment port in the world.

If the Japanese and the Singaporeans were able to succeed despite the challenges posed by disasters and inadequate resources, there is no reason why Filipinos, whose country is endowed by vast natural wealth, should fail.

And so, we Filipinos should not treat disasters as justifications for complacency but instead as motivations to succeed and achieve our national objectives.

(For comments/feedback email to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com. Readers may view previous columns at www.senatorvillar.com)

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