

**Column for Manila Bulletin**  
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## **Of Trees and Forest**

### **Disaster preparedness is long overdue**

MANILA, Philippines — We should have learned it a long time ago.

I'm referring to disaster preparedness. We all know how many lives have been lost, how many homes, schools, roads, and other facilities and infrastructure have been destroyed by earthquakes, floods, typhoons, and other calamities.

Germanwatch, an international think tank focusing on climate and development, says the Philippines is among the ten 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 rendering 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.

On 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 study shows that 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 2009, we were hit by a disastrous double whammy. Tropical storm "Ondoy" poured a month's worth of rain in six days in Metro Manila and flooded at least two-thirds of the metropolis as well as surrounding areas. Typhoon "Pepeng" followed a few days later, this time flooding Central Luzon, where it destroyed 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 produced large waves that hammered the coastline of Manila Bay, caused flash floods that rendered Roxas Boulevard impassable the whole day, submerging Mabini, Ermita, Kalaw streets, Taft Avenue, and Ayala Boulevard in above-the-knee water. The US Embassy was flooded and had to suspend operations for several days. So was the Sofitel Hotel, which had to transfer its guests to other hotels.

The storm surge wasn't as huge or as destructive as the tsunami that hit northern Japan last March, but it was an indication that a tsunami may also hit us, and the destruction that can befall us if that happens.

The Philippines is part of the Asia-Pacific region, home to more than four billion people, which saw more than 30 million people displaced by environmental disasters in 2010, according to data from the Asian Development Bank. The ADB data also noted that the region also 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.

As of this writing, more than 10,000 delegates from 194 countries were meeting in Durban, South Africa, in an attempt to produce a new international agreement to replace the Kyoto Protocol, which expires next year.

The Kyoto Protocol, which was adopted in 1997, commits most developed countries to reduce emissions of gases that pollute the atmosphere and cause extreme weather changes.

Unfortunately, some of the richest countries, including the United States, did not sign the Kyoto Protocol. To date, Russia, Canada, Japan, and the US – all major sources of greenhouse gases – still refuse to sign a new agreement, while China, Brazil, South Africa, and the European Union want other countries to move first.

It seems the appeal made by United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for world leaders to take urgent action on climate change, saying “the future of our planet is at stake,” fell on deaf ears.

For the Philippines, the question remains: When will we be prepared for disasters? Considering our precarious location in the global disaster map, we cannot wait for an international agreement to meet the threats from disasters.

I know that the government has been doing disaster hazard mapping, and there are efforts to minimize the impact from calamities like flood control projects.

In my view, we should have an agency that will do scenario-building, the results of which should serve as guide for the preparation of basic equipment, as well as standard operating procedures or SOPs that will be followed if a certain situation occurs.

We should be more careful about tampering with nature. For instance, it may be a good time to slow down on reclamation projects.

I agree with the advice from the ADB that we should prioritize the development of rural areas and second-tier cities to slow down the migration into urban centers and lower the risks from flooding, which usually affects cities along coastlines, like Metro Manila.

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