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Philippines increasingly in election mode

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo described a recent devastating typhoon as a “once in a lifetime event.” Unfortunately, it was followed a week later by a further “once in a lifetime event.” More than 1000 people lost their lives but rather than a wake-up call to action, many officials appear to have seized the opportunity to benefit themselves by hoarding relief supplies.

Manila, Philippines. At the time of writing, storm warnings have once again been raised in Central and Southern Luzon as Typhoon “Santi” (international codename, “Mirinae”) entered the Philippines area of control. It is expected to make landfall by the All Saints holiday weekend (October 31/November 1). And once again residents have been advised to evacuate low-lying areas and mountain slopes as precautionary measures against flash floods and landslides. Those living in coastal areas have been warned to expect surges and large waves induced by the approaching storm.

This latest typhoon comes as Luzon—the northernmost part of the Philippines archipelago—is still recovering from two previous devastating storms that claimed more than 1,000 lives during the past month.

Tropical storm “Ondoy” (international code name “Ketsana”) dumped the heaviest rains in more than four decades on Metro Manila on September 26. More than a month’s rain, 455 millimetres, was dumped on the national capital in less than 24 hours, Ondoy surpassed the amount of rain (200–250 mm) unleashed by Hurricane “Katrina” on the southern parts of the United States in August, 2005.

Much of Manila was without power for several days and many areas were under more than 10 metres of water. The deluge submerged houses, washed away many shacks and shanties in squatter areas and forced many residents to scramble to rooftops to await rescue which in some cases took more than 24 hours due to lack of boats. According to the National Disaster Coordinating Committee (NDCC), 293 people were reported dead, many more remain missing and presumed dead and more than three million people have been displaced by the storm.

Typhoon “Pepeng” (international codename, “Parma”) arrived exactly one week later, and hovered over northern Luzon as a tropical storm for nearly 10 days, causing further massive flooding to agricultural areas and triggering more deadly landslides. That storm killed a further 438 people with a further 51 people still missing.

In her public statement, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo incorrectly described Ondoy as “a once in a lifetime typhoon—an extreme event whose record rainfall strained our response capabilities to the limit but ultimately did not break us.” Perhaps not, but it did point out to the lack of preparedness of the entire government including the NDCC, the national police and the armed forces and, in particular, the lack of equipment, including boats, that prevented timely evacuation and rescue.

The Philippines is no stranger to typhoons. Around 20 such storms enter the Philippines area of responsibility annually and it appears that in number and intensity they are becoming more problematic. Of course, the rapidly increasing population of the country—now more than 90 million—compounds the predicament.

In the aftermath of the devastation, there has been much beating of breasts about the poor state of national preparedness. Aside from emergency equipment, criticism has focused on the lack of Doppler radar to provide an early-warning system (promised several years ago following a similar such storm, but then quickly forgotten), the poor drainage system within Manila, compounded by the mountains of garbage that block run-off during heavy storms and the lack of emergency evacuation shelters.

The fact is that the President was dangerously wrong in her “once in a lifetime claim”. Rather it is an easy means of brushing off this latest calamity when all the signs point in the opposite direction.

A recent study by the Asian Development Bank (*The Economics of Climate Change in Southeast Asia: A Regional Review*) and available from the ADB website, should be compulsory reading for all Filipino officials. That report suggests that even on optimistic assumptions about the rate of change, by the end of this present century Southeast Asia can expect to see its average temperature rise by 4.8°C from 1990 levels, a sea level rise of 70 centimetres and increased rainfall (together with greater variability) in the Philippines. Change is already evident. “Heat waves, droughts, floods, and tropical cyclones have become more intense and frequent, causing extensive damage to property, assets, and human life. The number of recorded floods/storms has risen dramatically, particularly in the Philippines, where the number rose from just under 20 during 1960–1969 to nearly 120 by 2000–2008”.

In the period 1906–2006, typhoons accounted for 60% of all natural disasters in the Philippines; there has been an upward trend in rising sea levels compounded by land subsidence as industrial users tap local aquifers lowering the natural water table in the process. Rising sea levels have already contributed to the loss of arable lands in low-lying coastal areas. This rise has intensified saltwater intrusion into groundwater resources in the northern part of Luzon, predominantly an agricultural region, resulting in a decline in crop yields already. And this is just for starters.

The evidence, supported by a variety of authoritative studies by a diverse group of agencies, suggests that President Arroyo is not on top of the issue but once again, instead of providing real leadership, has brushed the problem aside.

To her credit, she has ordered an emergency importation of rice because crop damage from the recent storms suggests that supplies will run short next year. But this is no more than a stop gap measure. Populations are rising throughout Southeast Asia and, again due to climate change, overall crop yields appear to be set to trend downwards. It is not hard to project the consequences of rising

populations and declining agricultural yields, particularly on a nation that cannot feed itself at the present time despite having idle agricultural land in abundance (especially in Mindanao). With the Philippines leading the pack in terms of population increase, it can ill afford to leave land idle.

One month after the storms hit, almost 200,000 people are still living in makeshift shelters. Once again foreign donors have responded and come to the rescue. Over the past month, more than US\$10 million in cash has been received by way of emergency assistance from foreign governments as well as relief supplies that have been donated by both overseas as well as local groups. And yet again, there are charges of ineptness if not outright corruption in the manner in which supplies are being distributed (or rather, if reports are to be believed are sitting in warehouses and not distributed).

According to a credible report appearing in the US newspaper *Philippine News* and circulated widely online, while appealing internationally for urgent donations, the Philippine Government also stipulated that all such donations be coursed through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). And it is in DWSW warehouses that much of the donated relief supplies remain. According to a departmental official, the delay in distributing the goods has been due to a shortage of volunteers; yet people who volunteer to assist are being turned away with the excuse that the department already “has too many volunteers.” According to one blogger (and, yes, this whole sorry episode is being extensively blogged by concerned Filipinos): “*The relief goods are not moving.. By the way things look, they are not going anywhere. Hindi maglalakad mag-isa ang mga donations na ito papunta sa mga evacuation centers.*” It seems that in the Philippines, corrupt officials miss no opportunity to line their own pockets, even seeking to profit from national disasters. But without leadership from the top, is there any hope of a change of mindset?

No wonder many people are banking on the elections next year to bring about the change that many decent people seek. But with so many people benefiting from the present system, there are a significant number who will do all in their power to resist any change. And without any long-term plan, things can only go from bad to worse.