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Storm-Battered Philippines Moves to Reduce Emissions—and Risks

The fastest-growing country in Asia is putting in place policies for lower carbon growth

By Lisa Friedman and ClimateWire | Thursday, June 13, 2013 | 3 comments

The Philippines, Asia's fastest-growing country and among its most vulnerable to climate change, has launched several new strategies to both prepare for the impacts of global warming and develop its renewable energy capacity.

Meeting in Washington, D.C., recently, a high-level government delegation outlined its plans for low-carbon growth and this week is meeting with counterparts in California to discuss ways to implement policies on the ground.

From a new "People's Survival Fund" aimed at making communities more resilient to climate change to working with the U.S. Agency for International Development to create a greenhouse gas inventory, the Southeast Asian archipelago nation is among a growing number of threatened countries whose leaders say they see in climate change an opening to push smarter growth.

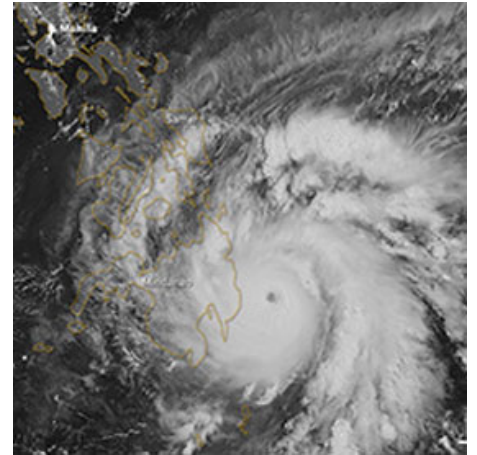
"There is really a lot of opportunity for the Philippines on climate change, especially in the area of mitigation," said Philippines Climate Change Commission Secretary Mary Anne Lucille Sering. Sering's agency -- one of the world's first climate change commissions -- recently launched several "eco-town" frameworks around the country, all chosen for being critical biodiversity areas vulnerable to climate change.

Meanwhile, a new renewable energy law is finally on the books in the Philippines, and this week the government released guidelines for clean energy projects to be considered for feed-in tariffs. The government has set a target of tripling renewable energy capacity by 2030 to at least 15,000 megawatts of installed capacity.

Coal and natural gas currently dominate the energy landscape in the Philippines, but it also ranks second after the United States in global geothermal power production, and the country's energy department has been mapping renewable capacity nationwide.

High potential for renewable energy

Although the Philippines suffers from power shortages and some of the highest electricity rates in the region, Sering said parts of the country with high biomass, solar and wind potential can supply their own electricity and even produce excess. A recent Greenpeace report argued that renewable energy can contribute more than 50 percent of the nation's energy by 2020, an investment that could



Typhoon Bopha killed more than 1,000 people and left more than 80,000 homeless.

Image: Photo courtesy of NASA

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"This should be considered defensive expenditures," Sering said. "Climate change is for us more of an opportunity than a disaster."

But then, there is no shortage of disaster. The island nation experiences an average of 20 shattering typhoons each year. In 2009 alone, Sering said, typhoons wiped out 2.7 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

"Just in one year," she said. "We are talking about 2 billion pesos [about \$48 million] diverted from education, building new roads and other things. It's created a dent in our anti-poverty initiatives."

Climate policy experts say they have been struck by the amount of work the Philippines is doing domestically to get a jump on climate change, even as countries dither over how much to curb greenhouse gas emissions or aid poor nations.

Athena Ballesteros, a senior associate at the World Resources Institute think tank and a senior adviser to the Philippines climate change negotiating team, said the government knows it can't afford to wait for global assistance. She said the People's Survival Fund -- for which the government has carved out a percentage of the national budget -- is a sign of serious commitment.

Not waiting for international consensus

"A country like the Philippines that has been battered and seriously impacted by climate change is taking on responsibility. They know they can't wait for the international community to figure this out," Ballesteros said. Last year's Typhoon Bopha killed more than 1,000 people and left more than 80,000 others homeless.

"This is the reason not just why things are happening so fast, but why it's getting the highest level of support. The country has been hit so severely," she said.

Last year, according to the U.S. State Department, the Philippines saw funding from a \$4.7 million USAID program to provide technical expertise on low-emission development throughout Asia, a \$2.9 million project to help prepare adaptation projects and a \$300,000 program to help Asian nations develop greenhouse gas inventories.

USAID Assistant Administrator Eric Postel said the United States sees its clean energy aid in the Philippines and elsewhere as "an opportunity to enhance our diplomatic relations."

Despite the aid, though, the countries often are on opposite sides of the fence when it comes to international climate talks. As Bopha struck, the Philippines' lead negotiator to the U.N. global warming discussions broke down and delivered an emotional plea for the United States and other big polluters to give "no more delays, no more excuses" and start reducing emissions.

The country also led the charge for the United States and other wealthy countries to compensate developing nations for "associated loss and damage" from sea-level rise, extreme weather and other climate-change-related impacts.

"What's happening in the negotiations does not really reflect what's happening on the bilateral level," Sering said. "We're so satisfied sometimes with incremental success, sometimes personality-driven, that we tend to forget why we're here in the first place. On a bilateral level, there is a sincere effort to help."

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