

Logged out

By BusinessMirror Editorial, February 6, 2017

In 1991 massive flooding and landslides brought on by a strong typhoon resulted in the deaths of nearly 8,000 people in Ormoc City, Leyte. The Ormoc tragedy, as it became known, was largely blamed on logging and deforestation. Calls for a total logging ban rang loud in the halls of Congress and Malacañang then.

In 2004 hundreds of people died in floods and landslides in Quezon, Aurora and Nueva Ecija after a series of storms. Blame was again cast on loggers who have stripped forests bare and turned lowland villages into death traps. Politicians talked all over again of enforcing a total logging ban.

What do they say about people who do not learn the lessons of history? They are doomed to repeat them. So, here we are again.

Expressing his anger over the unabated logging that reportedly is also to blame for the massive floods that recently claimed lives and destroyed properties in Northern Mindanao, President Duterte reportedly told Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez during a Climate Change Commission meeting last week to “stop all logging operations with no exemptions”.

The President ordered the departments of Environment and Natural Resources, Agriculture and of the Interior and Local Government to form a committee to create the implementing rules of a nationwide logging ban.

We will not tire from saying this, shouting it from the rooftops even. Skewed public policies can lead to the creation of disasters. It is not just climate change and the weather. We have suffered one tragedy after another as a result of rampant logging and, yet, what have we done to prevent the next? Administrations have responded in a reactive manner that did nothing to prevent further disasters.

Lessons should have been learned after what happened in Leyte, Aurora, Quezon, Nueva Ecija and many other provinces. Floods and landslides are not just natural, but man-made, disasters. They are rooted in poverty, corruption and environmental abuse. For as long as we do nothing to significantly reduce these problems then we would keep repeating the tragic mistakes of history.

So another total or partial logging ban by another administration is now in the works. Over two decades ago, during public hearings in the Senate, then- Sen. Orly Mercado noted that there's hardly any difference between illegal loggers and legal loggers. He said the only difference is that the so-called legal loggers have the political clout to get timber license agreements.

Indeed, for years environment groups have blamed legal logging for the denudation of Philippine forests. They say logging companies have used their legally allocated cutting permits to illegally access logs in areas outside the official limits of their permits.

Enforcing partial logging bans is actually more difficult than enforcing total logging bans. To begin with, primary forests from which absolutely no logging must be done have not been

properly or clearly identified by the government. Also, the government does not have the manpower to monitor logging activities in restricted areas. Even if they have people in these areas, they're usually no match to the military might big-time loggers wield. Another thing is, once the timber is cut, even the stolen can become legally clean.

Forest laws around the world have hardly been enforceable. This is why logging has been generally unsustainable. In pursuing a total or partial logging ban, therefore, the question is not whether it is right but whether it is enforceable. Coming out with any kind of ban is one thing and having it followed is another. In the real world, implementing the law has less to do with justice than with strategy.

For instance, could the people responsible for forest management implement any ban successfully given the poor implementation of present forest-protection laws? If present laws can only be strictly implemented, the impact would already be similar to a total logging ban.

Also, for a lot of people in upland communities, logging is the only way to feed their families. So any policy solution must provide for the creation of alternative jobs and community support for them. There must be incentives for compliance that would be more attractive to logging.

We know what we must do, the really hard part is doing it. There is no alternative but to try to rehabilitate the damage that our inaction has caused the environment, our forests, in particular. The government, in the past, has been the last to act on rampant logging and our people have paid for its neglect dearly with their lives.