



NEWS ROUNDUP

30 APRIL 2024 [08:00 am]

- Philippines suspends in-person classes due to heat, jeepney strike
- [Opinion] Climate change poses dire health and human rights risks
- Youth participation key to addressing climate change issues: ChildFund Philippines
- DENR to take water conservation steps amid 'alarming' Angat Dam water level
- Legarda seeks greater participation of women in climate change adaptation
- [Opinion] Distance learning, flexible workweek options ease heat wave, traffic congestion woes
- Asia hit hardest by climate change, extreme weather
- You can help DENR make an accurate PH mangrove map
- Filipino farmers struggle as drought and heatwave hits

CCC IN THE NEWS:

- Be sun-safe

ABS CBN

[Philippines suspends in-person classes due to heat, jeepney strike](#)

The Philippines will suspend in-person classes in all public schools for two days due to extreme heat and a nationwide strike by jeepney drivers, the education department said Sunday.

ECO BUSINESS

[\[Opinion\] Climate change poses dire health and human rights risks](#)

By: Chris Beyer

Climate change has not traditionally been seen as a health and human rights concern — but that may be changing following recent high-profile court cases.

Youth participation key to addressing climate change issues: ChildFund Philippines

ChildFund Philippines supports youth in Infanta, Quezon through a climate action program called Project Greenlight. This initiative aims to help address climate change issues and mitigate climate-induced disaster risks, underscoring the central role of youth in driving climate action within their community.

GMA NEWS

DENR to take water conservation steps amid 'alarming' Angat Dam water level

By: Joviland Rita

Water conservation measures will be implemented to ensure enough supply amid the "alarming" decline in Angat Dam's water level, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said Monday.

MANILA BULLETIN

Legarda seeks greater participation of women in climate change adaptation

By: Hannah Torregoza

Senate President Pro Tempore Loren Legarda on Monday, April 29 called for greater participation of women in the government's crafting of policies in climate change adaptation.

[Opinion] Distance learning, flexible workweek options ease heat wave, traffic congestion woes

The Department of Education suspended classes nationwide yesterday and today due to the latest heat index levels. A record high temperature of 36.8 degrees Celsius (101.8 degrees Fahrenheit) was experienced on Saturday, April 27, with the heat index, which takes into account humidity, reaching 45 degrees Celsius. The current heat wave is expected to last until the middle of May, or for at least two more weeks, and the raging El Niño phenomenon has exacerbated its impact.

MANILA STANDARD

Asia hit hardest by climate change, extreme weather

Asia remained the world's most disaster-affected region in 2023 due to weather, climate and water-related hazards. Storms and floods have hit the hardest, a new report published by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) last week revealed.

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

You can help DENR make an accurate PH mangrove map

By: Russel Loreto

After all the application of high technology, nothing still beats ground-level, old fashioned field work.

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Filipino farmers struggle as drought and heatwave hits

By: Pam Castro

Filipino farmer Daniel Velasco pumps water from a well in a desperate attempt to save his wilting vegetables, as a scorching heatwave and the worst drought in years hits crops.

CCC IN THE NEWS:

DAILY TRIBUNE

Be sun-safe

The Climate Change Commission urges the public to take proactive measures to reduce the effects of extreme heat which may persists until May, according to the weather agency PAGASA.

Information and Knowledge Management Division

ABS CBN

Philippines suspends in-person classes due to heat, jeepney strike

The Philippines will suspend in-person classes in all public schools for two days due to extreme heat and a nationwide strike by jeepney drivers, the education department said Sunday.

Extreme heat has scorched Southeast Asia in recent weeks, prompting thousands of schools to suspend in-person operations and authorities to issue health warnings.

Many schools in the Philippines have no air-conditioning, leaving students to swelter in crowded, poorly ventilated classrooms.

"In view of the latest heat index forecast... and the announcement of a nationwide transport strike, all public schools nationwide shall implement asynchronous classes/distance learning on April 29 and 30, 2024," the department said on Facebook.

Heat index remains at dangerous levels in several areas of PH

The education department oversees more than 47,000 schools across the archipelago nation.

Some jeepney drivers also plan to hold a three-day nationwide strike starting Monday to protest the government's plan to phase out the smoke-belching vehicles used by many Filipinos to commute to work and school.

PISTON to hold 3-day transport strike from April 29

The suspension of in-person classes comes after Manila recorded its highest ever temperature.

The temperature in the city hit a record high of 38.8 degrees Celsius on Saturday with the heat index reaching 45C, data from the state weather forecaster showed.

The heat index measures what a temperature feels like, taking into account humidity.

The hot weather persisted on Sunday with many people flocking to air-conditioned shopping malls and swimming pools for relief.

"This is the hottest I've ever experienced here," said Nancy Bautista, 65, whose resort in Cavite province near Manila was fully booked due to the hot weather.

"Many of our guests are friends and families. They swim in the pool to fight the heat."

The months of March, April and May are typically the hottest and driest of the year, but this year's conditions have been exacerbated by the El Nino weather phenomenon.

"All places in the country, not necessarily just Metro Manila, are expected to have hotter temperatures until the second week of May," Glaiza Escullar of the state weather forecaster told AFP.

"There is a possibility that the areas will exceed those temperatures being measured today until the second week of May."

Camiling municipality in Tarlac province, north of Manila, recorded a temperature of 40.3C on Saturday -- the country's highest this year.

As the mercury rose, Gerise Reyes, 31, planned to take her two-year-old daughter to a shopping mall near Manila.

"It's hot here at home. This is the hottest I've ever experienced especially between 10:00 am and 4:00 pm," she said.

"We need a free aircon to cut our electricity bill."

Global temperatures hit record highs last year, and the United Nations' weather and climate agency said Tuesday that Asia was warming at a particularly rapid pace.

The Philippines ranks among the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

ECO BUSINESS

[**\[Opinion\] Climate change poses dire health and human rights risks**](#)

By: Chris Beyrer

Climate change has not traditionally been seen as a health and human rights concern — but that may be changing following recent high-profile court cases.

On April 9 the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of a group of elderly Swiss women who claimed the government's inadequate efforts to combat climate change put them at risk of dying during heatwaves.

And in India, the Supreme Court on April 6 recognised a right against the adverse effects of climate change as a distinct fundamental right in the Constitution.

In that judgement, one of the judges said the rights to life and equality couldn't be fully realised without a clean, stable environment. The court also highlighted the connection between climate change and the right to health.

The World Health Organization has declared climate change to be the greatest threat to health that humanity faces.

Since climate change affects so many aspects of our lives, its effects on health and health care are complex, multiple, and highly variable across geographies, ecozones and development levels.

There are direct impacts on our bodies and communities, such as have emerged with extreme heat, droughts, floods, fires and other climate change-driven catastrophic events.

There also are more complex and indirect impacts, such as increasing food insecurity, the rising threat of infectious diseases, increased exposure to water and air pollutants, the health impacts of forced mobility and migration, and the mental health and social impacts of the climate crisis that affect us on our deepest levels.

Yet climate change has not traditionally been seen as a health and human rights concern — a reality which, arguably, needs to change.

In a report published last month in *The Lancet*, ‘Under threat: The International AIDS Society-Lancet Commission on Health and Human Rights’ we suggested several pathways through which climate change bears on the right to health.

A foundational principle of human rights is universality. We do not derive rights from citizenship or social standing, but from the fundamental basis of our shared humanity.

Indeed, the founding document of the modern human rights movement is called ‘The Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, precisely because the rights it enshrines are held to be universal — shared by us all.

A terrible irony of the climate crisis however, is that the burdens of climate change are not shared equally by all.

Those who have done the least to impact the climate — the peoples of low- and middle-income countries, the rural poor and Indigenous communities — are by far the most affected.

This raises the issue of climate justice: what do the highly industrialised nations, which have so damaged the climate, owe to those whose health, livelihoods, and very survival are being impacted by the crisis?

Many of the worst-affected states, including the small island nations, have argued that reparations are essential if they are to survive.

Indigenous peoples, particularly those still living on their traditional lands, are literally fighting for their lives against loggers, miners, ranchers, farming interests, the energy industries, and others who seek the bounty they have preserved for us all. Without protection for Indigenous rights, we may lose the world’s last great forests.

Earth has essentially three lungs; the Amazon Basin, the Congo Basin, and what remains of the forests of Southeast Asia. Without these great generators of oxygen and capturers of carbon, Earth’s atmosphere would soon cease to be breathable for mammals, including humans. This makes Indigenous rights inextricably linked to all of our health and wellbeing.

Another major form of health inequity is increasing exposures to water and air pollutants, again most impacting those who have done the least to impact the climate. Premature deaths due to diseases caused by these chemical pollutants were estimated to top nine million in 2015.

Access to health care, even in the wealthiest societies, has also been affected by climate crises. The multiple hurricanes which devastated Puerto Rico in 2017 led to widespread disruptions in health care facilities, and forced thousands of people on chronic medications, including antivirals for HIV, to have sustained treatment interruptions.

Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath led to significant destruction of healthcare facilities in the US, primarily through flooding, and led to multiple deaths, including among elderly and disabled patients in long-term care facilities.

Strikingly, the death rate was almost 50 percent higher among Black residents of New Orleans than among Whites — demonstrating that health inequities can be sharply worsened during catastrophic climate events. Same storm, yet significantly worse outcomes for minority communities.

The threat of infectious diseases is also rising, including in the Global North, as climate change shifts the best habitats for some species, bringing animals and humans closer together, and hence increasing the risk of diseases spilling over from one to the other.

The climate crisis is also responsible, in part, for the enormous levels of population displacement, mobility, and migration we are now seeing.

There are an estimated 110 million people—the largest number ever recorded — who are displaced either internally in their home countries, or outside their homelands.

While many have fled conflict and war, many others are forced to leave their homelands due to climate-driven changes in rainfall, droughts, floods and fires — all increasing food insecurity and driving people to seek better futures.

Providing even the most basic health care services, such as childhood immunisations, prenatal care, and adequate water and food is an enormous challenge and will likely only increase. And as we have seen in many countries, the rise in migration and displacement can have potent impacts on political culture — increasing nationalism, xenophobia, anti-immigrant policies, and racism.

How will humanity cope with these interrelated challenges? The human rights movement does have some compelling examples of success. Multiple cases, including several brought by young students, have successfully argued for a new right: the right to live in a healthy environment. This is another universal right we all share by virtue of our human status.

It is essential to protect human health, and the health and wellbeing of all the living things with which we share the planet.

Realising any right is always a struggle, and the resistance is always immense.

But this is a right we really have no choice but to fight for. We cannot maintain human health without healthy ecosystems. And that requires we extend the right to live in a healthy environment to all of us now living, and for the generations to come.

Youth participation key to addressing climate change issues: ChildFund Philippines

ChildFund Philippines supports youth in Infanta, Quezon through a climate action program called Project Greenlight. This initiative aims to help address climate change issues and mitigate climate-induced disaster risks, underscoring the central role of youth in driving climate action within their community.

Project Greenlight, in partnership with the municipal government of Infanta and ReINA Federations of Parents Associations, Inc., integrates Ecosystem-Based Adaptation (EbA) and Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) into the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) program of Infanta, Quezon.

Project Greenlight represents a comprehensive approach to climate action, acknowledging that climate change is a complex and interconnected issue.

"It integrates education, community engagement, and sustainable livelihood development to help the next generation of local eco-leaders combat climate change, especially since the Philippines is prone to various climate hazards and risks due to its geographical location and human activities," said Erwin Peter Galido, Program Specialist - Disaster Risk Management of ChildFund Philippines. "Our ultimate goal for this project is to eventually make this a national program and support more Filipino youth taking action to mitigate climate change impacts," he added.

The initiative employs a classroom-to-forest approach to support the youth in taking an active role in environmental protection and conservation, efficient energy consumption, waste management, awareness raising, local policy advocacy, and climate action. It involves taking students out of traditional classroom settings and into natural environments, such as forests, wetlands, or parks, to learn about environmental concepts, ecological systems, and conservation practices firsthand.

"We believe in the power of these young individuals to make a meaningful difference in their communities and beyond. With Project Greenlight, we aim to work hand-in-hand with them to actively contribute as catalysts for climate action, particularly in communities vulnerable to the impacts of disasters, and for a more sustainable and eco-friendly world," said Anand Vishwakarma, CEO & Country Director of ChildFund Philippines.

Youth leaders and advocates in the program, called Eco-scouts, highlight the importance of youth engagement in creating sustainable solutions to address climate change.

"This immersive approach gives us a better understanding of why we need to combat climate change now more than ever," said Ramiline Resplanador, one of the Eco-scouts. "Throughout the implementation, we are learning the impacts of deforestation and degradation on our community, and so we encourage other children to become better stewards of our planet," she added.

Lu By Ron Broto, another Eco-Scout, shared, "I apply what I learn from the project by encouraging my family to switch to more sustainable ways of living, including waste segregation, plant growing, and efficient energy consumption." He added that the project also enhanced his leadership skills to educate more members of the community about climate change, helping them make conscious choices that have a positive impact on the environment.

The project's approaches and tools will enable individuals and communities to adapt to the challenges of climate change while simultaneously promoting sustainable development. This includes the promotion of climate-smart agricultural practices, green jobs and livelihoods (e.g., zero waste stores), and renewable energy, among others.

ReINA Federation and the government of Infanta, Quezon have been integral partners in the pilot implementation of the program, demonstrating a commitment to building climate resilience in Infanta, Quezon which is prone to natural disasters because of its diverse landscape.

The government of Infanta emphasises that climate awareness should lead to action. "It is imperative to get commitments on the ground and to act with more urgency. By thinking globally and acting locally to adapt to our community's needs, we can effectively utilise our resources to mitigate climate change impacts," said Ron Pallugna Crisostomo, Municipal Government Department Head I - Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Officer of Infanta, Quezon.

ChildFund Philippines encourages more multi-sectoral collaborations with corporate institutions, non-government organisations, and other stakeholders to expand Project Greenlight's implementation to other communities across other parts of the country.

GMA NEWS

DENR to take water conservation steps amid ‘alarming’ Angat Dam water level

By: Joviland Rita

Water conservation measures will be implemented to ensure enough supply amid the “alarming” decline in Angat Dam’s water level, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) said Monday.

“The decrease in water level in terms of its rate is quite alarming,” DENR Undersecretary Carlos Primo David said in a press conference.

“Halos 0.4 meter, half a meter ang binababa ng water level natin kada araw. Therefore, kailangan na nating magkaroon ng kaunting intervention,” he added.

(The water level in Angat Dam lowers by almost 0.4 meters, half a meter every day. Therefore, we need to have a little intervention.)

Currently, the water level in Angat Dam is 188.45 meters. The minimum operation level is 180 meters.

Angat Dam in Bulacan supplies around 90% of the water needs of Metro Manila, Rizal, and portions of Cavite and Bulacan.

Due to this, the DENR will impose a “prescribed conservation action” in May.

The water conservation measures include the regulation of water supply and pressure as well as the prohibition of using hose in watering gardens and washing cars, among others.

Due to the impact of the El Niño phenomenon, many areas in the country are experiencing water shortage, David said. The most affected areas are Ilocos, Bulacan, Palawan, and Zamboanga City.

MANILA BULLETIN

Legarda seeks greater participation of women in climate change adaptation

By: Hannah Torregoza

Senate President Pro Tempore Loren Legarda on Monday, April 29 called for greater participation of women in the government's crafting of policies in climate change adaptation.

Legarda made the call as the nation grapples with the extreme heat wave caused by the prevailing El Niño phenomenon.

"Throughout history, women have been at the forefront of ecological protection and sustainability. From grassroots activists to policymakers, women have played pivotal roles in championing sustainable practices and policies that promote climate resilience," said Legarda, during her keynote address at the Filipina Change makers: Champion for Climate Resilience Forum, held at the Senate.

Legarda lamented women in vulnerable communities, who bear the brunt of climate change, are excluded from decision-making and leadership roles.

"We must instead empower them as climate actors, give them access to education and resources, and ensure that they are heard and their contributions valued," she said.

The senator pointed out the Philippines is blessed with a wealth of change makers who can lead the way in climate action.

"From farmers implementing sustainable practices to activists advocating for clean energy, Filipino change makers are driving innovation and inspiring change," she said.

"Let us reaffirm our commitment to creating a world where women and girls are given the chance to realize their potential. If we do this, together, we can build a more sustainable and resilient future for all," she reiterated.

[Opinion] Distance learning, flexible workweek options ease heat wave, traffic congestion woes

The Department of Education suspended classes nationwide yesterday and today due to the latest heat index levels. A record high temperature of 36.8 degrees Celsius (101.8 degrees Fahrenheit) was experienced on Saturday, April 27, with the heat index, which takes into account humidity, reaching 45 degrees Celsius. The current heat wave is expected to last until the middle of May, or for at least two more weeks, and the raging El Niño phenomenon has exacerbated its impact.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), “exposure to heat causes severe symptoms, such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke — a condition which causes faintness, as well as dry, warm skin, due to the inability of the body to control high temperatures.”

Climate change and global warming have brought on increased exposure to heat waves. Between 2000 and 2016, the number of people exposed to heatwaves increased by around 125 million. The WHO reports that more than 166,000 died due to heatwaves between 1998 and 2017; more than 70,000 died during the 2003 heatwave in Europe.

Due to the urban heat island effect (UHI), the effects of heat are more severe in cities, but those living in non-urban communities are also prone to suffer disruption of livelihood and well-being.

Just like during the coronavirus pandemic, the heatwave has prompted a return to asynchronous or distance learning. Students are expected to study assigned learning materials with the guidance of parents and guardians at home. In technologically-advanced schools whose learners are equipped at home with digital tools, this could be carried out seamlessly — but this is the exception rather than the rule. Students’ quality learning is likely to decline in this suboptimal scenario.

On another front, the Department of Finance (DOF) has announced that it will shift to a four-day workweek starting May to alleviate the burden imposed on employees by traffic congestion in Metro Manila. This flexible work arrangement is allowed by the Civil Service Commission. Government departments and offices may observe 10-hour workdays for four days, instead of the standard eight-hour work day and five-day workweek.

This arrangement enables covered workers to enjoy an extra day off from work — and an opportunity to engage in home- and family-oriented activities that are beneficial to

health and well-being. In Asia, Japan initiated an optional four-day workweek in 2011; in Belgium, there are four 10-hour workdays in a week; Brazil and Canada began piloting this practice in 2023.

Australia's pilot experiment in 2022, participated in by 20 companies, produced beneficial outcomes. The work-life balance outcomes were remarkable. Two-thirds of employees said that they were more satisfied with their use of time. Half of all participants reported less conflict in families. Frequency of exercise increased. Health and well-being outcomes were similarly positive. Reduction in burnout was reported by 64 percent; 38 percent felt less stressed.

Extraordinary times call for innovative alternatives that could potentially bring about improved quality of work life and enhance the well-being of a productive citizenry.

MANILA STANDARD

Asia hit hardest by climate change, extreme weather

Asia remained the world's most disaster-affected region in 2023 due to weather, climate and water-related hazards. Storms and floods have hit the hardest, a new report published by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) last week revealed.

Following close on the heels of the study of climate change in Europe, published by WMO on May 22, the State of the Climate in Asia 2023 report highlighted the accelerating rate of climate change across several indicators such as surface temperature, glacier retreat, sea level rise and more.

"The report's conclusions are sobering. Many countries in the region experienced their hottest year on record in 2023, along with a barrage of extreme conditions, from droughts and heatwaves to floods and storms," said WMO Secretary-General Celeste Saulo,

Climate change has exacerbated the frequency and severity of such events that profoundly impact societies, economies, and most importantly, human lives, she said.

With the warming trend almost doubling since the period from 1960–1990, Asia is heating up faster than the global average, with increased casualties and economic losses from floods, storms and more severe heatwaves.

In 2023, sea-surface temperatures in the northwest Pacific Ocean were the highest on record. Even the Arctic Ocean suffered a marine heatwave. In many areas of the region, including the Arabian Sea, the southern Kara Sea and the southeastern Laptev Sea, the sea surface is warming more than three times faster than globally. The Barents Sea was identified by the report as a "climate change hotspot."

Driven by thermal expansion and the melting of glaciers, ice caps and ice sheets, sea level continued to rise globally. However, in Asia, rates were higher than the global mean over 1993–2023.

Last year, the continent saw 79 water hazard-related disasters, with over 80 percent linked to floods and storms, resulting in over 2,000 fatalities and affecting nine million people directly, according to the Emergency Events Database.

Many parts of the region experienced extreme heat in 2023. Asia's annual mean near-surface temperature ranked as the second highest on record with 0.91 °C above the 1991–2020 average. Particularly high temperatures were observed from western Siberia to central Asia, and from eastern China to Japan. Japan and Kazakhstan experienced a record warm year.

Meanwhile, the level of precipitation was below normal in large parts of the Turan Lowland (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan), the Hindu Kush (Afghanistan, Pakistan) and the Himalayas, as well as around the Ganges and lower course of the Brahmaputra Rivers (India and Bangladesh).

The Arakan Mountains in Myanmar and the lower course of the Mekong River areas have also seen less rainfall than usual, while Southwest China suffered from a drought, with below-normal precipitation levels nearly every month of 2023.

Despite overall lower precipitation, several extreme events occurred, such as heavy rainfall in Myanmar in May; floods and storms across India, Pakistan and Nepal in June and July, and record hourly rainfall in Hong Kong in September, to name a few.

Home to the largest volume of ice outside of the polar regions, the High-Mountain Asia region with the Tibetan Plateau at its center, has approximately 100,000 square kilometres of glaciers. Over the last several decades, most of those have been retreating, and at an accelerating rate. Twenty out of 22 observed glaciers continued losing mass, yielding to record-breaking high temperatures and dry conditions.

Permafrost—soil that continuously remains below 0 °C for two or more years—is also surrendering territories to the increasing air temperatures in the Arctic. The most rapid thawing of permafrost in Asia is observed in the Polar Urals and the western regions of Western Siberia.

Severe dust storms, lightning and thunders, waves of extreme cold and thick smog were also among extreme events that affected lives of millions across Asia.

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

You can help DENR make an accurate PH mangrove map

By: Russel Loreto

After all the application of high technology, nothing still beats ground-level, old fashioned field work.

Especially for making an accurate assessment of one of the country's most important ecosystems: mangrove forests.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is calling on the public to check out local shorelines or wetlands and help the agency map mangrove growth areas across the archipelago.

By taking photos of the mangrove thickets they can find and sending the image through an app, they can help "validate" satellite data that the DENR has so far gathered for the National Mangrove Map.

Based on input collected as of 2023, the map was developed by the DENR and the Philippine Space Agency to guide policy decisions geared toward the restoration and protection of mangrove ecosystems, which are valued not just as terrestrial and marine habitats but also as carbon sinks and livelihood resource.

"Amid the climate emergency and destruction of mangroves, everyone has the ability to make a difference by tracking and protecting our natural resources," Environment Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo Loyzaga said in a DENR statement on Monday.

Target sites

Loyzaga stressed the need for a science-based approach to conservation efforts, starting with accurate ways to "measure what we treasure."

Private citizens and organizations are encouraged to "verify the presence or absence of mangroves" in their locality using a mobile phone or drone camera, and send the images to the DENR via the ODK Collect app, the DENR said.

The app comes with an e-manual on how to go about the data collection and confirmation, with instructions on the proper distancing of validation points and flight plans if drones will be used, among others.

With over 600 sites and 30,000 target points across the country, the DENR said it hoped to finalize the field validation of the National Mangrove Map by June this year.

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Filipino farmers struggle as drought and heatwave hits

By: Pam Castro

Filipino farmer Daniel Velasco pumps water from a well in a desperate attempt to save his wilting vegetables, as a scorching heatwave and the worst drought in years hits crops.

It has hardly rained on Velasco's plot of gourds and tomatoes since November, as the El Nino weather phenomenon brings drier conditions and baking temperatures.

"I'm losing a lot of money," Velasco, 57, told AFP, standing barefoot on the cracked ground in the northern province of Nueva Ecija.

His gourds "died before I could even sell them", pushing him deeper into debt.

El Nino is a naturally occurring climate pattern typically associated with increased heat worldwide, leading to drought in some parts of the world and heavy rains elsewhere.

Unusually hot weather has blasted South and Southeast Asia for the past week, forcing schools to send children home and the authorities to issue health warnings.

Global temperatures hit record highs last year, and the United Nations' weather and climate agency said last week that Asia was warming at a particularly rapid pace.

More than half of the Philippines' provinces, including Nueva Ecija, are in drought as El Nino exacerbates hot and dry conditions typical for March, April and May.

Temperatures have sizzled around 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in parts of the country in recent days, with the heat index -- what the temperature feels like, taking into account humidity -- in one area hitting 53C.

'Up against nature'

In the Philippines, which ranks among the countries most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, the upcoming harvest is likely to be "below average", the UN has warned.

Crop losses are estimated at more than four billion pesos (\$69 million) and farmers face further hardship if the drought doesn't break soon.

It is hoped rain in mid-May will bring some relief, but drier than normal conditions could persist until August, Ana Solis, chief climatologist at the state weather forecaster, told AFP.

Joey Villarama, spokesman for the government's Task Force El Nino, said the current conditions were comparable to the drought during the 1997-1998 El Nino, the country's worst-ever dry spell.

"We are up against nature," Villarama said. "It's very difficult because it's unpredictable."

Like Velasco, many farmers in Nueva Ecija normally count on the Pantabangan Dam for irrigation, but levels have fallen nearly 50 metres (164 feet) and it no longer reaches their fields.

The receding water forced two hydropower plants to shut earlier than usual -- worsening already strained electricity supplies, as people crank up air conditioners and fans to cool off.

Some farmers like Velasco switched from rice to vegetables, which need less water, but even those are dying.

Velasco said his January harvest was halved by insufficient rain, and those that he did pick were too small to sell at the market.

Now, the groundwater is drying up.

It takes Velasco three times as long to draw water from the well as it did before.

He worries how he will cope if the rains do not come soon and his well dries up -- as others around have done.

"Farming is my only way to earn a living," Velasco said, fearing he would slip deeper into debt and be unable to send his youngest child to school. "If there's no water, how can I continue?"

His neighbor Eddie Balagtas, 69, is also struggling.

"I just wasted my effort," Balagtas said, removing his shrivelled watermelon vines on his one-hectare (2.5-acre) farm.

"If you don't have other sources of income, there's no choice but to borrow money," Balagtas said, praying for rain so that he could plant a crop of rice. "It's hard."

'Why is this happening?'

Rice farmers in drought-stricken Occidental Mindoro province, south of the main island of Luzon, have started to receive financial assistance.

"You could push your fist through the cracks, that's how severe it is for the rice farms," said Daisy Leano, information officer for San Jose municipality.

As dam levels drop, some urban areas have been left without water.

More than 100 cities and municipalities have declared the drought a state of calamity to access emergency funds.

Fire trucks have been deployed in neighbourhoods of Bacolod city in the central province of Negros Occidental to deliver water to residents.

"I ask myself, 'Why is this happening to us?'" said Dolores Bauya, 54, who lines up at least once a week to receive the free water.

In the central province of Cebu, Har Tabalino, 24, said she has to pump water from a well in another village to cook and bathe, after water from a nearby dam stopped.

"I think this is the hottest and the longest (dry) season I have ever experienced, that it actually affected my everyday life," Tabalino said.

CCC IN THE NEWS:

DAILY TRIBUNE

Be sun-safe

The Climate Change Commission urges the public to take proactive measures to reduce the effects of extreme heat which may persists until May, according to the weather agency PAGASA.

Individuals, families and communities should take the following precautions to avoid heat-related illnesses.

STAY HYDRATED

Drink plenty of water throughout the day. Avoid sugary or caffeinated beverages, as they can contribute to dehydration.

KEEP COOL

Spend time in well-ventilated areas. Wear lightweight, light-colored, and loose-fitting clothing to help your body stay cool.

LIMIT ACTIVITIES

Try to limit outdoor activities, especially during the hottest parts of the day (usually midday to early afternoon). If you must be outside, take frequent breaks in the shade or indoors. Plan outdoor activities for cooler times of the day or reschedule them for a later date.

PROTECT SKIN

Wear protective covering such as a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses to protect your face and eyes from the sun's harmful rays.

KNOW SYMPTOMS

Learn the symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke, such as nausea, dizziness, headache, rapid heartbeat and confusion. If you or someone else experiences these symptoms, seek medical attention immediately.

BE UPDATED

Always be informed about weather forecasts and heat advisories in your area from official and reputable sources.

=END=