



THE wrath of Mother Nature was unrelenting as non-stop rains flooded Metro Manila, Bulacan, Pampanga, Rizal and nearby provinces earlier this week. The roads and highways of the metropolis and provinces became flowing rivers of angry waters with all kinds of floating human waste, as the skies unleashed torrential rains for almost three whole days, from Monday to Wednesday.

Indeed, it was an experience like no other. In parts of Metro Manila such as Marikina, Quezon City, Manila and Pasig, people had to wait for hours, and even days, on their roofs waiting to be rescued.

In Bulacan and Pampanga, floods continued rising instead of subsiding, even when the downpour finally stopped. Residents scrambled to higher ground to escape the waters.

And yet, why blame Mother Nature for this calamity? Just look at the bald mountains surrounding Metro Manila and provinces in Central and Northern Luzon. Illegal logging and massive tree cutting have denuded our forests. Rainwater cascading from the mountainside of Antipolo and San Mateo contributed largely to the flooding in Cainta, Pasig and Fairview in Quezon City, and other low-lying areas at the foot of the mountains of Rizal.

Now, more than ever, is the time to heed the SOS of Mother Nature. We really have no choice but to take care of the environment. Paying lip service is not enough. Illegal loggers should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. And we have to plant more trees. There's simply no getting around what is necessary to rehabilitate the environment.

One such noteworthy project is the Marilao-Meycauayan-Obando River System (MMORS) cleanup.

Once a pristine river with gentle breezes and waters teeming with fish that served as an important source of income to the coastal folk in this Central Luzon province, the river system has since fallen prey to selfish economic interests and human carelessness over the years.

Sadly, the MMORS now holds the ignominious record of being the fifth most polluted waterway in the world.

We urgently need to support the campaign to revive the badly polluted MMORS in Bulacan. The herculean project recently got a big boost from the success of the mangrove-replanting project of Ecoshield Development Corp., in partnership with the Bulacan provincial government, the municipal governments of Marilao, Meycauayan and Obando, and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Ecoshield is the proponent of the sophisticated engineered sanitary-landfill project being built in Barangay Salambao in Obando, Bulacan.

The Noah-like proportions of the flood, which inundated Metro Manila, and Bulacan and other provinces early this week, is already water under the bridge. But there is still hope.

Ecoshield has reported that the mangrove-replanting program that started a year ago has now yielded 300,000 fully mature mangrove trees. Eventually, these will be transplanted into the coastal villages of Obando and nearby towns to serve as fish sanctuaries and to slow down sea waves, shielding coastal communities from storms, soil erosion and floods.

There are other facilities set up by Ecoshield that will contribute a lot to the river-cleanup moves. Aside from the engineered sanitary landfill that it will build at the site of a 44-hectare former fishpond in Barangay Salambao, Obando, Ambassador Antonio L. Cabangon Chua, the businessman-philanthropist behind Ecoshield, has donated a 1-hectare property worth at least P25 million in Meycauayan town as the venue of a septage-treatment plant.

The company has also pledged to dedicate 37 percent of its landfill capacity to accommodate toxic river waste and all the garbage to be collected from all the coastal towns of Bulacan. Ecoshield also committed itself to provide the technological and financial resources to the river-cleanup project.

Truly, this shows the commitment of Ecoshield to safeguard the environment.

Ambassador Cabangon Chua himself is personally monitoring the progress of these projects that aim to promote a healthier environment, clean up the polluted rivers in Bulacan and manage the proper disposal of waste as a legacy to future generations.

It will be recalled that the Blacksmith Institute (BI), an international New York-based group and non-profit organization committed to solving life-threatening issues of environmental degradation in the developing world that had ranked the Bulacan river system as one of the dirtiest in the world, had hailed Ecoshield when its officials visited the project recently.

The BI executives were impressed by the Ecoshield-led private-sector efforts. By partnering with the provincial government, the seemingly impossible task of cleaning one of the dirtiest river systems in the world could now be achieved.

The BI, which has successfully completed over 50 cleanup projects in 21 countries, has forged partnerships with various governments, non-governmental organizations, the international community and local agencies to design and implement innovative and low-cost solutions to the victims of ecological disasters.

Recently, the Bulacan MMORS river project received a shot in the arm when the Blacksmith group said it would endorse it to the World Bank for funding support. The group will push for an initial \$50-million loan grant for extensive preliminary studies prior to the comprehensive cleanup activity.

This provides a strong impetus to the government-private-sector alliance to implement the river-rehabilitation program. Certainly, what was once thought of as an impossible task has become doable in our lifetime.

In addition, Ambassador Cabangon Chua also pledged to provide trash boats to ferry the debris that will be collected from Manila Bay as part of the cleanup of the Bulacan river system. The only problem now is where to dump the trash.

This is precisely why the government should ensure that Ecoshield's landfill project be operational soonest in light of the need to manage trash and waste properly and clean up the river systems to facilitate the flow of water, particularly during the critical flood season.

The social benefits that will redound to our people would be immeasurable. For one, providing a clean and healthy environment for our children will go a long way toward helping them develop their full potential as productive members of society.

The recent wrath of Mother Nature has made us feel that the task of caring for the environment can no longer be put on hold. We have to attend to the thousand and one details that go with it. The devil is in the details. Otherwise, there will be the devil to pay.