



WMO FEATURE

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THE WORLD OF WEATHER AND WATER

Point Of View

ELEVENTH CONGRESS WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

Interview with Dr. R. L. Kintanar
Former President of
World Meteorological Organization
Permanent Representative of The Philippines
with WMO

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by Dr. Sylvia Moore
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Dr. Moore: Here we are in the Studio at the Eleventh Congress of the World Meteorological Organization. It is a great honour to have with me in the studio one of the personalities who has been coming to Congress for many, many years. In fact probably he knows more about the World Meteorological Organization than anybody else here.

His name is Dr. Roman Kintanar from the Philippines, the Permanent Representative of the Philippines with WMO and he was the President of the World Meteorological Organization from 1979 to 1987.

Dr. Kintanar, from your point of view, you are admirably positioned to let us know what is the vision of WMO that you see from your angle over there in the Philippines. What are the main problems that you have?

Dr. Kintanar: I have been working with the Philippines Meteorological Service since 1948. It was quite a few years before I was involved personally with WMO and during that period I felt that I was exposed to the different impacts of meteorological phenomena on people. I could see in some areas in the Philippines people affected by typhoons or floods and so the point of view I have always held was the point of view of people who are directly affected by the various meteorological phenomena that we deal with here in the Organization.

Dr. Moore: And in what ways are people affected in the Philippines by these meteorological phenomena?

Dr. Kintanar: Well, of course these meteorological phenomena have their benefits for the people. For example, where typhoons are considered in the Philippines as something very negative, it is because it is only the negative side, the destruction that it brings, that of course gets the attention of the media. I ought to bring out the fact that without typhoons maybe our water resources in the Philippines would be deficient, and therefore we should thank tropical cyclones for some of the benefits we get for agriculture. But in general the meteorological phenomena which appear to attract the attention of the people in the country are the ones that would have adverse effects, like lack of rainfall during droughts and the excess rainfall during certain seasons when we have to worry about floods and, in general, such things as the destruction brought about by typhoons.

Dr. Moore: Looking at the World Meteorological Organization in perspective from the times when you used to come to Congress and then 1979 to 1987 as the President, you must have seen a lot of changes during those years. What would you say the main changes are?

Dr. Kintanar: Well, of course, this is a personal perspective only, but I did seem to have the impression that in the early years WMO felt it was most important to attend to major programmes like the WWW (World Weather Watch) and such things. It seemed to me that it hardly had any time to give attention to those things affecting some particular areas in the world but which did not seem to have global implications.

Over the years I have detected that now WMO has developed the capability of attending to these things. Its attention to the tropical cyclone programme for example, its attention to the training needs of the smaller countries, its attention to the regional phenomena like monsoons and tropical cyclones. I believe these have increasingly been given attention by the Organization and I think that this is a very happy development because it has also brought along with it a greater feeling of belonging to the smaller countries.

Frankly I used to remember a time, this was two decades or so ago, when we talked of EC or Congress the main actors were the representatives of the big countries, and I think anybody who witnesses a WMO Congress at this time would know that the participants and representative from smaller countries are quite active. This I see over the years has been one of the very important changes.

Dr. Moore: It seems to me that the smaller countries have a lot to offer whether they come from the developing world or the developed world?

Dr. Kintanar: Well, actually when I said smaller countries I should have referred to the developing countries. The developing countries in general have been increasing their participation and involvement in WMO's affairs over the last decade or so.

Dr. Moore: We cannot do without the developing countries because the data is absolutely essential for any kind of representative monitoring of what is going on in the atmosphere and in the hydrosphere as a basis for taking measures as to what we should do about the fundamental issues of the day such as global warming and potential climate change.

Dr. Kintanar: Yes, that is very true. When we think of the inputs that are needed into the science we have of course to realize that many of these come from developing countries. They cover the largest portion of the globe and since the data information that are needed in meteorology are obtained from all over, then this means that the developing countries have a large input to give.

Also I think that the developing countries should really be important to WMO because the majority, the biggest portion of the population of the globe is in these countries and if we think that we believe that the purpose of WMO is really to enable the people of the world to benefit from the science of meteorology, from the applications of the knowledge relating to meteorology then we have to think of how the actual impact on the developing countries will be where the greater number of people are found.

Dr. Moore: The development now in meteorology and climate studies is such that, what we are finding out is going to change the kind of development in developing countries in terms of economic models, economic developments which incorporate sound environmental policies. How do you see that happening?

Dr. Kintanar: I see that as an important development. We are now quite concerned with what man is doing not only to his own society but even to what we now call environment. It was something that eventually had to be realized and I am glad that people are looking at it now, as the protection of the environment has a very important part to play after all as to how man can really live on this earth. Again, because of this, everybody should be concerned about these issues in meteorology, climate and so on because the people in the developing countries are more likely to be affected, to be more seriously affected by any changes of climate as compared to those coming from the advanced countries.

Dr. Moore: What measures can WMO take to assist the developing countries in this particular need?

Dr. Kintanar: I think the directions that are being taken now by the Organization are indicative of the realization that the developing countries should be assisted. Personally I have been very happy with the effort made by the Organization to try to support the idea of having Regional Meteorological Centres. I used to discuss with our Secretary-General and other members of the bureau on how developed countries can compensate the less advanced or the poorer countries on this matter of the World Weather Watch.

You see everybody contributes to the World Weather Watch. These contributions are actually not being utilized equally by all the Members of WMO. The poorer countries because they do not have the facilities and they do not have the scientists, have been unable to maximise the benefit they can get from this collected meteorological information and data.

On the other hand, they are not to blame for this. The developed countries can obviously get more benefit from the compilation and collection of global information and data. So, as a matter of compensating, I was very happy to see that the Organization is sponsoring the idea of establishing Regional Meteorological Centres which will try to produce products useful to the Member countries in the regions but which otherwise they could not afford to get because, maybe super-computers are needed or top level scientists are necessary which Member countries may not have.

In some of the areas where there are many developing countries, like Africa and South America, and in Asia there are efforts to create Regional Specialised Meteorological Centres that will be equipped, hopefully with the assistance of the developed countries, with computers to produce products which otherwise the smaller and poorer countries would not be able to acquire. Now if this is assisted fully by the membership of the Organization, especially by the developed countries, then it will compensate for the greater sacrifices that these poorer countries have to make so that the data is available to the whole world.

Dr. Moore: Where will the regional centre be in Asia, in your part of the world?

Dr. Kintanar: Actually the group in our region in Southeast Asia has identified Singapore to be the site of a Regional Specialized Meteorological Centre. The Centre will of course deal with the issues that are more important to us like tropical cyclones and monsoon rains and so on, and should be equipped with advance computer facilities. The Centre will allow scientists from the various neighbouring countries to have a chance to be exposed to the actual use and operation of facilities which otherwise they would not have.

Dr. Moore: Clearly in Southeast Asia in terms of geography and atmospheric matters there is a homogeneity in terms of common problems?

Dr. Kintanar: Yes, we have a lot of common problems, and our cooperation in that region has been very good so that there has been an acceptance that certain facilities will be located in certain areas; others will be at other areas. Manila for example is the seat of the Regional Training Centre for Meteorology in the region, and we have been successful in Manila in training quite a few foreign students who come to Manila to take up a Masters degree or a Doctorate degree in meteorology. Certain aspects of the world, like the monsoon studies, have been a principal task that Malaysia and Indonesia have gone into because it affects them more, and yet it affects the whole region, so there has been very good cooperation and sharing of facilities and capabilities.

Dr. Moore: Your area is densely populated with many different cultures.

Dr. Kintanar: Yes, that is true. Our region meteorologically includes part of Southern China and we have Indonesia there with two hundred million people. The Philippines is not too small either, with sixty-two million and all of these countries are quite sensitive to impacts of meteorological phenomena. Rains can cause floods, lack of rain will immediately cause droughts. We are notorious for having the biggest number of tropical cyclones, more than any other area in the world.

Dr. Moore: If you get the equipment you need and the manpower to run the equipment and you collect the data for this large area with so many people, how will you get the information to the people? And how would it be useful for them?

Dr. Kintanar: Actually that is still one matter that has not been fully solved. We consider in our area that one of the biggest problems is the dissemination of information to the final user. Even in one particular country alone, to communicate with the inhabitants in various islands is a problem that some other countries do not know about. We have this matter of communication that we are trying to work on now. I think that most of the countries in our region are also quite aware that the problem of getting information to the end-users, to the people who might become victims of disasters, is very important to attend to. I know that all countries in our region are putting a lot of emphasis into developing communications, and the matter of dissemination I think is getting more and more attention. Hopefully in a matter of a few more years, we may find some rapid improvement in this particular area.

Dr. Moore: And presumably the key users in your area are going to be the government planners who need this information to improve economic development plans and plans for social development?

Dr. Kintanar: Yes, that is right and incidentally I should mention that I think the areas in our region are quite happy with the recognition of the need for international cooperation in the reduction for natural disasters. Now the WMO of course is one of the important actors, I think, in this very important play. These countries are waiting for plans for technology assistance in terms of facilities and so on, to gain over the next ten years or within the next ten years, the necessary knowhow and methods so that they can serve the people who become victims of disasters. We are very hopeful that the IDNDR (International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction) and the cooperation of the specialised agencies of the United Nations, especially WMO, will produce very positive results in this area of disaster reduction.

Dr. Moore: It seems that there is a complementary issue, in that what is happening in the regions is a benefit to the international scenario. The World Meteorological Organization has a great deal to offer in terms of closely cooperating with the regions. So what areas do you feel are the key areas for this closer cooperation?

Dr. Kintanar: Actually the WMO as it has already claimed, has always been doing what is now being emphasized in the IDNDR. The activities of the WMO have always had behind the idea of helping people in those countries which are disaster-prone. Now WMO is going to be helpful not only because it is its responsibility to do so but because IDNDR also encourages other specialized agencies to do what they can to reduce disasters. The WMO I think has been very cognizant of this responsibility with respect to IDNDR, and I must also say that the countries themselves are aware that if we are going to have a tangible and really concrete significant advances with respect to meteorological disaster reduction then a lot of the information, and a lot of the initiative may have to come from WMO.

Dr. Moore: You are an internationally well known scientist in your own right. What is your main interest in science?

Dr. Kintanar: My interest has been very much related to my own responsibilities in the Philippines government. I have headed the Philippines Meteorological and Geophysical Service in the Philippines for more than thirty years now. This is of course the reason why I have also been a Permanent Representative of WMO for a long time, thirty-three years. The area that I have been most exposed to and I feel is most important really, is the development of the various scientific works that will lead to improvements in forecasting and anticipating what might happen with respect to climate.

What you mentioned about my being accepted, is simply because I have been in this kind of work for so long. I still recall, maybe two decades ago, very few people actually talked about the international efforts on, say, disaster reduction. We were the first ones in our region to do so, and I must say that it is partly to our credit that we organised a full committee more than twenty years ago. This was the first regional grouping that eventually has been emulated, and now we have five of these regional tropical cyclone bodies. The first one of these was the typhoon committee in Southwest, Western South Pacific and this was an inter-governmental body composed of the countries most affected by typhoons.

I am also the oldest remaining member participant in that group. I am the Co-ordinator and Secretary of the group in Manila and I still recall way back in 1965 when ESCAP requested a meeting of people who might be interested in doing something about typhoons. That first meeting was held in Manila in 1965 and I am the only participant of the meeting who still circulates around meteorological circles. I am very proud of this.

Dr. Moore: Your knowledge is invaluable to the World Meteorological Organization. What do you see are the main points coming out of this Congress in 1991?

Dr. Kintanar: When Congress comes up there are periods when certain very exciting issues are around. This does not happen in all Congresses. I can recall the time when the World Climate Programme was approved by Congress and the years before that when the preparations were made. It just so happened I think from my own view point that this is one of the times when people in Congress do not have to worry about any thing too controversial.

But I think it is decisions on the matter of how the Organization can continue contributing to the issue of climate change, which is a very important matter today. There are of course so many other things that WMO has decided to do, that I am sure will have very important impact on how Met Services will develop. For example, what direction will it take in the future. Of course I do appreciate the fact that WMO now has continuing long-term plan which was not there before, and so this has clarified to Meteorological Services what roles they have.

Dr. Moore: That makes it easy because if you only meet every four years you need to have a substantially structured plan.

Dr. Kintanar: Yes. I am sure that the availability of short-term, medium-term and long-term plans has helped the Met Services to have an idea of what they should be doing or contributing to national meteorology inspite of the fact that there have been many changes in their leaders.

Dr. Moore: The World Meteorological Organization is at the vortex of a key world issue, Climate Change and all its ramifications, not only for human kind but for the biosphere. You may say that we moved into planetics. How is WMO going to cope with this? There is the climate convention preparations. There is the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and the Conference on Water and Environment. All of these activities bring WMO right into the forefront. How do you feel that WMO should anticipate these activities?

Dr. Kintanar: Well, I am not worried about how WMO will do because I was fortunate in seeing it from the very start. When the First World Climate Conference was set up I was quite active then. I was part of the small group that had been looking into the World Climate Programme, and at that time I thought that the Organization was going into something that was important. It was trying to check on the possibility of climate change.

At that time it was just a perception, just a few people saying may be after all the weather was changing. It is very satisfying to know that suddenly after that, because of the decision of the Organization to check if in fact this was the case, by bringing scientists and climatologists together, there was a consensus that this was taking place. Therefore the Organization led the way to verifying what was going on.

Then we had the Second World Climate Conference and the IPCC. These came up with indications that what was suspicious eight or ten years before, was actually considered to be happening. So the issue now is what do we do about this? I have seen WMO progress from the time when it just started to recognise the problem up to the time when it assisted in confirming it and bringing up ideas as to what may be done. So I am quite confident that WMO will continue to make very solid contributions on this matter for the benefit of the world.

Dr. Moore: That is most interesting news. Twelve years ago, you were among the pioneers in foreseeing that there could be a problem.

Dr. Kintanar: Yes. At that time nobody was talking the way we talk about climate change now, but there was the suspicion and as scientists in the climatological field, we felt that the Organization should do something to find out what is really happening, and it did.

Dr. Moore: This has been taken on as a major issue by many different professionals, politicians, economists, industrialists. At the time when you had your first World Climate Conference it was the scientists who were talking. So do you see an enormous difference between the issue then and the issue as it is now?

Dr. Kintanar: Yes that is so. When I think about the World Climate Programme and the changes that have taken place, this matter of climate was a very important matter to WMO, even before 1979. Having seen this, as I said, I feel quite confident that WMO will be there to do some very useful service with respect to recognition, and indicating directions on this matter of climate change. So if you ask me whether we should be worrying about WMO I don't think we should. I know that it has done very well in this issue and it will continue doing what it is responsible for.

Dr. Moore: As somebody who has been so much involved with the World Meteorological Organization, and your life has been so clearly interwoven with the Organization, your scientific life, your work in the Philippines, your untiring work for the WMO at headquarters, it would be most interesting for us to hear what is the advice you would give to future generations?

Dr. Kintanar: My advice would be much related to my own personal experience. In 1979 in Congress 79, I was elected president, my family was with me and I introduced my family to the Congress and I stated that my family would serve as a reminder for me that what we do here in WMO is not really just for delegates who are here or even for the Met Services. They are things that are intended eventually to help the people in their countries. In the developed countries maybe it will help them in the sense that it will bring better comfort, better business because of meteorological information. For other countries it may actually mean saving of lives. It may mean that your own family will be experiencing some of the weather which is sometimes very cruel.

So my advice is that everybody who should go into the field of meteorology should not be thinking so much of the science that they produce, if it is necessary, or of the facilities that they can put up, but in terms of whether they are going to be helping in bringing benefits to the people who rely on us really to make sure that weather is not so cruel to them. In essence I feel that people in meteorology besides thinking of the science and coordination in international relations should eventually be thinking of how they can help their people.

Dr. Moore: The benefits of meteorology are so wide-ranging from natural disaster preparedness through to agriculture, aviation, shipping, business. How has meteorology helped in these areas?

Dr. Kintanar: In agriculture it is quite clear that many countries are pursuing agriculture without the benefit of what we in WMO of course immediately know. We call it agrometeorology, the application of meteorological information and data to scientific agriculture. This unfortunately is something that is still unknown in some sectors of the world, especially those areas where agriculture is quite important because they have not gone into manufacturing and industrial development. I think that the ability of the Organization to assist those countries with actual information about agrometeorology, the ability of the Organization to indicate to the governments of those countries how important certain statistics could be, will bring significant benefits to the people there.

Unfortunately you cannot wait for these people to ask you what they want because sometimes they are unaware of those things that can be helpful and the Organization is therefore doing a lot of good in bringing the idea of such things as agrometeorology, safety in sea navigation. For example in the Philippines it is so important. We appreciate that the Organization has various ways of telling our country that we must improve your wiring instruments, we must find ways that marine navigation, and marine travelling would be safer and so on. These are very solid benefits that I think people in the member countries are getting from the Organization.

Everybody knows that unless you cooperate in meteorology you would not get very far because you need the data from outside. But it is not only data, it is really the knowhow. The countries which are Members of WMO have learned how to cooperate with each other so well that it is now not just data that are needed from outside that comes to the countries, we also need advice, know how, even moral support and sympathy when disaster comes around. These are the things that I think have brought very solid benefits to countries. I for one, appreciate so much the actions and accomplishments of WMO in this area because I know they have had very solid benefits to the people in my country.

Dr. Moore: So from your point of view we have just heard a most fascinating account of the historical record. You have given us a living historical record of the World Meteorological Organization from your perspective and at the same time you have shown us how meteorology is a life line to the future. Am I right?

Dr. Kintanar: That is right. I might add that it is so much easier for me to encourage the people working in my area. I simply tell them that what they are doing is not just for them. What they are doing might help people in other countries because the data that they are observing, and the accuracy with which they are observed are going to be vital and important to people in other countries. This gives them a sense of being of service to the world not just to one small group. Now if you are working as a clerk, or as an accountant you can hardly expand your service to anyone surrounding you. But in the field of meteorology it is quite clear that whatever the small amount of service you are doing, at least a certain portion of it accrues to people that you may not know, but who may benefit from what you are doing.

Dr. Moore: It is a wonderful profession.

Dr. Kintanar: Oh yes it is.

Dr. Moore: I always think of climate as a prime mover of mankind. Thank you so much and I wish you every success for the future work that I am sure you will be doing in the Philippines and elsewhere.

Dr. Kintanar: Thank you for the opportunity to say something about these topics.