

The Philippines:

Why 60 people died in the Cherry Hills housing estate

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As many as 109 people died in the Philippines when Typhoon Olga provoked torrential rains and flooding throughout much of South East Asia in early August. The areas worst affected were Manila, Pampanga, Rizal and Pangasinan. Over 73,000 people were forced to leave their homes and seek shelter and food in local halls, schools and clubs. Some 900 families were evacuated from the town of Valenzuela as flood water rose to dangerous heights.

The majority of the deaths were concentrated in one small housing estate—the Cherry Hills subdivision in Antipolo, a Manila suburb, and home to hundreds of families paying off low-cost, concrete houses. On August 3 the subdivision became a death trap when its foundations filled with water and the whole complex slid down the hill on which it was built.

Two days later, the *Philippines Daily Inquirer* reported that local authorities had warned residents to leave the area some four hours before the landslide, when cracks appeared in roads and walls. But as families packed their belongings, houses higher up on the hill suddenly slid, crushing those below beneath tons of rubble and mud.

Rescue teams lacked adequate equipment. They were forced to use backhoes to shift concrete slabs and other debris in an attempt to rescue those buried. Bodies were still being recovered weeks later. The official death toll from Cherry Hills alone has reached 60.

Government officials involved in the development of the estate immediately denied allegations by residents that the disaster was the product of inept construction. A planning officer for the Antipolo City council quoted in the media claimed that “the tragedy was beyond human control”. But the evidence that has emerged contradicting this claim is overwhelming.

A preliminary investigation has begun into Philjas, the

Japanese-Filipino consortium that developed Cherry Hills. Charges that could be laid against the company include imprudence, resulting in multiple homicide.

The developers built the estate in an area well known for its landslides, digging trenches between the houses to divert run-off. But these trenches retained water, which then seeped under the concrete foundations and ultimately caused the buildings to slide and collapse, one on top of the other.

A geology professor, Victor Madlambayan, told the *Inquirer* that “an exposed cross-section of a mountain behind the subdivision showed horizontal layers indicating that the area was a former lake bed. Looking at the ruins, it appears that the houses were crushed, not only because of the collapse of the cliff, but movement of the entire foundations of the subdivision due to clay used under the foundations,” he said.

He pointed to the earthquake in Dagupan City in 1991, where houses and buildings built on a former river delta had collapsed causing substantial loss of life. “This is a lesson for everybody. They could have avoided developing that area for a subdivision. We could have avoided a repeat of Dagupan”.

The Real Estate and Developers Group, an industry association, met in Antipolo following the disaster. Its geologist Joel Muyco admitted: “In view of the high slope and unstable terrain in which a portion of the Cherry Hills subdivision is situated, extra engineering interventions should have been considered and implemented to address the extra risks involved.”

An initial report by the Philippines government ombudsman damned the housing and local government bureaucracy for allowing the estate to be built and inhabited. Twenty-three officials have been placed on six-month preventative suspension while prosecutors assess

their culpability and possible criminal charges for “graft and conspiracy”.

The report points out that the estate was built in 1991 but only received clearance from the Environment Department in 1994, due to continued violations of procedures. It finds that housing regulatory bodies issued final permits and licenses in favour of Philjas despite the non-compliance.

Filipino president Joseph Estrada, who attempts to present himself and his government as “friends of the poor”, denounced the developers, in an effort to score political mileage from the disaster.

Information soon came to light, however, making clear that culpability for the Cherry Hills tragedy extends to the highest echelons of the Filipino government.

Prior to Typhoon Olga, the Cherry Hills Homeowners Association and environment protection groups had organised protests, petitions and letters to the government warning of the danger posed to the estate by flash-flooding, especially during the torrential typhoon rains. In particular, they pointed to the effects of over-quarrying on mountain ranges around Antipolo Rodriguez and San Mateo, and rainforest clearing in the vicinity of the Cherry Hills subdivision.

Petitioners had directly addressed the Estrada government's environment minister, complaining that quarrying companies were operating at night to avoid detection. All pleas for government intervention and assistance were ignored.

The removal of soil and vegetation in the higher reaches was a major factor in the volume of water that travelled down the Cherry Hill slope on August 3.

The Real Estate and Developers Group has also revealed that the lax building guidelines, known as BPP20, that prevailed under the Marcos regime, were retained by the subsequent governments of Cory Aquino, Fidel Ramos and Estrada.

Certain definite conclusions can already be drawn: while typhoons and rain are “beyond human control”—the death of 60 people at Cherry Hill was not.



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