

"Promised Land" garbage landslide kills at least 200 in the Philippines

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In early July two tropical typhoons ravaged parts of the Philippines causing severe flooding and deaths. These storms are annual events that bring with them catastrophes affecting the country's most impoverished layers. In the capital Manila, a huge municipal garbage dump, ironically named the "Promised Land" by locals, became a sodden, unstable mass and then collapsed and burst into flames on July 10.

An avalanche of mud and rubbish crashed down upon a group of more than 100 shacks and huts, which were home to around 800 families. So far rescue workers have recovered 196 bodies from the refuse. Nine people who were rescued later died in hospital. About 60 victims are still unidentified. Among the dead are believed to be two German aid workers who were working with children from the poor families.

The actual death toll will never be known, firstly because officials have no idea how many people were living alongside the dump, near Payatas, and do not care how many have lost their lives. Local residents say that up to 500 are still buried under the rubbish, while local officials put the number at just 140.

Only about one-fifth of the 150-foot mountain of garbage has been dug through in search of bodies. The rescue work was hampered by the overwhelming stench of rotting rubbish and burnt flesh, and lack of adequate equipment. All rescuers and volunteers had to use were shovels, picks and spades. Many relatives and survivors used their bare hands. Only two backhoes were made available.

Desperate relatives continue to search through the rubble hoping to find their loved ones alive. One woman, Conchita Ramos, broke down and cried: "They have found my daughter's body and it was badly burned. They also found the body of her daughter but its head was gone."

The mountain of garbage had begun to slide on Sunday July 9, before giving way the next day. The subsequent fire was apparently caused by fallen power cables or overturned stoves in the shacks. Survivors told reporters that they heard a rumbling followed by an avalanche of garbage. Nine-year-old Nelda Taglo said: "I was sleeping when I thought I heard an airplane coming. Then there was an explosion. My Papa saved me."

The tragedy is not the first landslide at the Promised Land tip. "This is the Land of Hell," said Wilson Carpio whose wife, two children and seven nieces and nephews were buried under the rubbish. "In the dry season there are flames all around. In the rainy season there are landslides."

The Promised Land is a continual and obvious reminder of the wretched poverty and gross social inequality that exists throughout the Philippines. Located in a ravine, the dump was initially planned as landfill for a housing project. It now covers an area of 74 acres, rises as high as seven storeys and continues to grow as an estimated 10,000 tonnes of rubbish from Manila is deposited every day.

Thousands of people live in shanties around the edges of the tip, eking out an existence by scavenging through the refuse of society. When one third of the Filipino population lives below the meagre poverty line of \$US1 a day, the prospect of earning up to 200 pesos or \$US4.50 appears attractive. "It's raw capitalism working here. And it really generates money. Millions of pesos revolve through here every day," a local Catholic priest Father Joel Bernardo said in an interview in the *New York Times*.

A complex pecking order at the Promised Land tip is dominated by contractors who prepay large enterprises such as hotels for the right to sift through particular

truckloads of rubbish. They control the scavengers, who are mostly poor farmers forced to move to the city to survive. “Now they are like peasants in the cities. Pockets of peasants in the slum. Urban peasants. And similarly they work for landlords, the middlemen who support them with cash advances and then put them in bondage, just the way they were in bondage to their landlords in the countryside,” Bernardo said.

Various local and national officials have been compelled by the scale of the human tragedy to make some show of sympathy for the victims and their families. But their proposal is to close down the dump and remove the potential for further political embarrassment, even if that leaves tens of thousands of people with no livelihood at all.

Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado, who is in charge of rescue operations, summed up the government's attitude by saying: “It's high time to come up with a national policy on solid waste management. We cannot allow people to live so dangerously under the shadow of death in this dumpsite. We should have implemented the law much more strictly.”

President Joseph Estrada, who won office in mid-1998 with the slogan “Erap (buddy) for the poor,” responded by promising that bidding would open soon for a safer garbage system for Manila. “Hopefully in the next few months we will have a solution to the problem,” he said. For Estrada, it is the garbage that is the problem, not the people who are forced to scavenge to survive.

Even the promise of a “safe” waste system is illusory. In 1994, President Fidel Ramos ordered the closure of another notorious Manila dump known as Smokey Mountain as part of a city beautification campaign. It was all a matter of out of sight, out of mind. Many of the families who were displaced from Smokey Mountain ended up at the “Promised Land” at Payatas.

The Payatas site is a cheap and easy method of garbage disposal. Private trucking companies pay just \$US2.25 to dump rubbish there. It was to be closed permanently last December and moved to San Mateo, just outside Manila, but local residents refused to have the same problem relocated to their area.

The local city mayor, Mel Mathay, has tried to deflect criticisms of his administration by saying that he had ordered the residents out of the area the previous week for fear of landslides but they had refused to go. Even

after the disaster many people are determined to stay simply because they have nowhere else to go. “If I can still make a living here, I will stay,” said Alfreda Lacre. “If not, I'll go back to my province.”

Last Saturday some residents threatened to sue the government, garbage contractors and local officials for negligence. The general dangers were well known and there had been signs that a landslide was imminent but the officials did nothing.

Human rights lawyer Romeo Capulong, head of the Public Interest Law Centre, who is assisting in the preparation of legal suit, said: “We want justice for the victims. We want to highlight the criminal neglect of the government—national and local—as well as public officials when it comes to the plight of the poor people. The immediate cause of the tragedy was the height, weight and the condition of the structure that they kept dumping garbage on.”



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