

Death toll mounts in aftermath of Taiwan typhoon

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Taiwan's central region, previously devastated by "921" earthquake in September 1999, has suffered the greatest loss of life and damage from Typhoon Toraiji, which struck the island on July 28. With the official death toll already at 99, and another 116 people still missing, the typhoon is the deadliest in four decades.

Winds of up to 150 kilometres per hour pounded Taiwan's east coast and central region for nearly 48 hours. Torrential rain caused severe flooding and triggered at least 93 mudslides and landslides. Hundreds of homes were destroyed and thousands damaged. Electricity was cut to over 300,000 households and water supplies to more than 500,000. Rail services in eastern Taiwan may take up to two weeks to restore. Crops worth over \$US50 million were wiped out.

Most of the missing are in poverty-stricken villages in Hualien county and central Nantou county, many of which are precariously situated on mountainsides or in valleys. Nantou was at the epicentre of the 1999 quake. The villages are largely populated by Taiwanese aboriginals—the indigenous people who inhabited the island before Chinese settlements were established and who were pushed into the remote highlands as coastal land was taken by settlers. In recent decades, Taiwan's aboriginals have endured neglect and discrimination under the Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorship.

In the Nantou village of Dili, mudslides buried 30 houses and 16 people are missing. Rescue workers, who were rushed to the area, lacked earth-moving equipment and were flown out again without assisting in the search for survivors. Locals scoured the areas where their homes used to be and marked locations where they suspect missing loved ones may be buried. Heavy equipment did not arrive until August 4, a week after the typhoon. Wusong Ishibabanun, whose mother

is missing, told the *Taipei Times*: "The local government could have sent the bulldozers in earlier. We won't feel at ease until we find her. But after so many days her face has probably become unrecognisable."

In the Nantou townships of Hsinyi and Shuili, 17 people are confirmed dead, 84 are still missing and more than 400 houses were destroyed. The *Taipei Times* reported on August 6 from the Shuili village of Shangan where most of a family was buried in a mudslide. Chiang Pi-yun, who lost her husband when their house collapsed in the earthquake, told the paper: "I want nothing but my missing family. I earnestly hope the government will not cease looking."

The newspaper said Fongchiu village, in Hsinyi township, was "simply torn apart". "Roofs were scattered in the fields in the lower part of the village, which is now completely covered by mud and rocks. Most electricity poles in the neighbourhood are either half buried or completely felled by the mudslides." The worst affected villages, many of which can only be reached by four-wheel drive, still had no access to telephone services, power or water. The survivors were also suffering from food shortages and lack of counseling and medical treatment.

Warning of the risk of disease, a former Nantou county councillor, Sung Chiu-ming, appealed to the government: "Please send bulldozers to dig out the corpses and send helicopters to collect the remains as they are beginning to decay with the increasing temperature."

Taiwan's president, Chen Shui-bian, visited stricken areas and promised extensive relief to the victims. He donated a month's salary to an emergency fund and appealed for all government employees to donate a day's pay. He and his government have sought to

divert attention from any examination of the underlying reasons for the mudslides.

Premier Chang Chun-hsiung, the head of Chen Shui-bian's government, blamed deforestation by local villagers. "Inappropriate development projects should be held responsible," he told an agricultural seminar. To support themselves, farmers in Nantou and other mountain areas have extensively planted betel nut trees—betel nut is widely chewed on Taiwan. While betel nut is a profitable crop, the trees have shallow roots and are brought down easily in storms, leading to erosion and earth slippage.

Others have blamed government inaction. Experts have repeatedly warned that the "921" earthquake loosened the earth in mountainous areas of Nantou county and that heavy rain could trigger mudslides. Typhoons and severe tropical storms hit Taiwan every year.

During 2000, 56 mudslides took place in Nantou county, leading to appeals by scientists for a concerted effort to relocate the villages most at risk. The warnings were ignored by Chen's administration, which was formed in May 2000, due to the cost of land acquisition and compensation. According to the *Taiwan United Evening News*, plans to move 12 villages located near dangerous rivers were not implemented even though experts declared it urgent.

Shieh Chjeng-lun, head of Cheng Kung University's Disaster Prevention Research Centre, has damned local and national authorities for their failure to deploy sufficient flooding monitors on the region's numerous streams. "Having only 18 stations monitor more than 780 streams listed as dangerous is absolutely impossible," he told the *Taipei Times*.

These areas also lack flood protection. The Tahsing River, for example, does not have embankments capable of withstanding heavy rain even though it was classified as dangerous a decade ago. The river flooded during Typhoon Toraiji, triggering a mudslide that buried Tahsing village in Hualien county and took the lives of at least 24 people.

With elections due in December, the tragedy in central Taiwan has become a political football with the government and the opposition trading blame. The government has established a taskforce to examine the "feasibility" of shifting villages. An official from the Nantou Soil and Water Conservation Bureau told the

press that relocation was "overdue" in 65 villages. As after the 1999 earthquake, however, there is no guarantee that any action will be taken.



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