

More than 750 dead after tropical storms batter the Philippines

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Two tropical storms that caused flash floods and landslides have devastated large areas in the northern Philippines this week. The death toll could reach more than 1,000 as rescue workers continue to dig through the wreckage and reach villages that are more isolated. As of Friday, 753 bodies had been recovered and at least another 345 people were still missing.

The hardest hit have been three coastal towns in eastern Quezon province—Real, Infanta and General Nakar—where 688 bodies have been found so far and some 330 people are unaccounted for. The area was cut off for most of the week after tropical storm Winnie brought high winds, torrential rains and floods that damaged bridges and roads.

Efforts to reach the towns were further hampered when typhoon Nanmadol hit the country on Thursday. Air and sea relief operations were forced to turn back while soldiers and others carrying food and medical supplies struggled to reach the area by land. Some villages and towns were accessible only by foot.

In Real, a town of around 30,000 people, massive mudslides have buried houses and other buildings. As many as 100 are feared dead after an evacuation centre collapsed under the impact of one landslide. Continuing bad weather and the lack of equipment have hampered rescue efforts. People were compelled to use shovels and their bare hands. “We have been devastated,” Mayor Arsenio Ramallosa said. “Our food supply is dwindling and good for only another three days.”

Soldiers who trudged into Infanta found most of the town covered in mud. Huge boulders blocked the main roads and a pile of corpses was covered with plastic bags. Mayor Filipina Amerika explained: “This is the first time that Infanta has experienced this kind of calamity. Not just one but all of the 36 villages are submerged in mud.”

The extent of the destruction will become clear only when relief workers reach isolated villages. The National Disaster Coordinating Council announced on Thursday that 37,400 families, or 168,000 people, had been affected by the storm. The agriculture department estimated that 830 million pesos [\$US14.7 million] in damage had been done to crops, livestock and fisheries by storms this month.

Medical workers are now concerned by the danger of water-borne diseases—gastroenteritis, cholera and hepatitis—and have urged the quick burial of bodies. “The contamination of drinking water and the spread of diseases are always a problem in situations like this. The problem is with the living and not the dead,” one doctor said. Soldiers carried 200 body bags and lime into Real on Thursday, but more are needed.

International aid is trickling into the Philippines. Japan announced 15 million pesos or about \$US265,000 worth of aid in the form of tents, generators, water tanks and other items. Australia has indicated it will give \$390,000 in emergency aid. The US embassy in Manila has offered a mere \$100,000 to the Philippines Red Cross to assist victims.

Within the Philippines, President Gloria Arroyo has put on a display of concern, visiting Real on Thursday. She also made four helicopters from the presidential fleet available for relief operations. The government has declared “a state of calamity” in seven regions on the island of Luzon.

However, the extent of government financial support to the stricken communities is limited. Arroyo announced that just one million pesos or about \$17,500 would be made available from her Calamity Fund for each municipality. According to one estimate, the government would have to spend 90 percent of its annual disaster budget to repair the damage caused by

the storms.

Arroyo immediately blamed the disaster on illegal logging in the area and placed a former intelligence chief in charge of a nationwide crackdown on those involved. “Illegal logging must now be placed in the order of most serious crimes against our people,” she declared. “The series of landslides and flashfloods that hit several parts of the country should serve as a wake up call for us to join hands in preserving our environment and stepping up reforestation.”

There is little doubt that deforestation compounded the disaster. There has been massive illegal logging in the Sierra Madre mountain range since the 1950s. In the country as a whole, forest cover has declined precipitously from 34 percent in 1970 to just 18 percent. “Crackdowns” have been announced in the past, only to be forgotten.

Herando Avellande, mayor of the town of General Nakar, explained to the Inquirer news service: “Almost 40 percent of my constituency in General Nakar depend on illegal logging for a living. The local government can only do so much to provide honest jobs.” He called on the Arroyo government to help provide alternative forms of livelihood.

These comments point to other underlying causes of the disaster. The towns that were hardest hit all have high levels of poverty and are particularly vulnerable to storms and floods. Government hydrologist Richard Orendain said there was no government plan at present to move 110,000 people to more secure areas. He noted that most of the Filipinos living in areas at risk were poor. “Why else would you choose to live there if you were rich?” he asked rhetorically.

Government spokesman Neri Amparo pointed out that “people live among riverbanks, seawalls, and other vulnerable areas. Strong winds sweep them away like a broom to trash. Many of the typhoon victims are fishermen who put to sea even in a storm because that is the source of their livelihood.”

On average, the Philippines is hit by about 20 storms and typhoons a year. Last year the social welfare department assisted 2.6 million victims of disasters, including 1.7 million typhoon survivors. Of the 969 people who died in disasters, 268 were typhoon victims. A department spokesman Rey Marteja pointed out that about \$1.8 million is allocated each year in disaster funds, but “this is rarely enough”.

Nothing of course has been done to address the underlying social and economic problems.



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