

Nearly 2,000 feared dead as huge mudslide hits Philippine village

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An entire village in the Philippines was engulfed by a massive mudslide when the side of a mountain suddenly gave way last Friday. After three days of rescue efforts, most of the nearly 2,000 inhabitants of Guinsaugon in the province of Southern Leyte are still missing, feared dead.

Only 20 or so survivors were pulled from the debris on Friday as rescuers frantically sought to dig people out with primitive equipment and their bare hands. Imaging equipment and sniffer dogs have since been brought into the remote area, but no more survivors have been found. Some 70 bodies have been retrieved.

Among the missing, buried under up to 10 metres of mud, are 206 pupils and 40 teachers of the village's primary school. According to several media reports, text messages were sent by a teacher and a pupil, indicating that they were still alive. No messages have been received since late Friday, however.

Rescuers are working under extremely difficult conditions. Major General Bonifacio Ramos, who is in charge of the rescue operation, told reporters: "The mud is like quicksand. It is very deep and you have to be very careful. We can't move very fast and it's very difficult to bring in advanced heavy equipment because it may just get sucked into the mud."

The UN and a number of countries have donated financial aid and supplies. As in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami disaster, Washington has seized the opportunity to put US troops on the ground in the region. Two US warships have been dispatched to Southern Leyte and US marines are involved in the rescue effort at the site of the disaster.

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo expressed sorrow over the catastrophe and declared that every effort would be made to locate any survivors. Rescuers are still being hampered by a lack of modern

equipment and emergency lighting, however. Arroyo warned of further landslides amid forecasts of further heavy rain and promised to assist endangered areas adopt safety precautions.

Arroyo's comments are completely cynical. The causes of the latest tragedy are similar to those that have produced other mudslide disasters in recent years. On each occasion, Arroyo and other officials made a series of promises, only to drop them once public outrage subsided. In November 1991, flash floods and landslides killed about 5,000 people in Ormoc, the second largest town on Leyte.

Last Friday's mudslide was caused by the combination of a steep, unstable hillside and very heavy rain. In the previous week, more than half a metre of rain fell in the area—nearly four times the weekly average of 127 millimetres. Some villagers had been evacuated from the area but returned when the rain subsided. A mild earthquake measuring 2.6 on the Richter scale may have contributed to the disaster.

The entire 700-metre Kan-abag Mountain gave way from its peak, producing a mudslide three kilometres wide by the time it reached the village. Eyewitnesses reported a sound like an underground explosion. "I looked up to the mountain and I saw the ground and boulders rushing down," survivor Alicia Miravalles told the press. "I thought I was dead. If the landslide did not stop, I would really be dead, now."

Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Angelo Reyes denied that illegal logging contributed to the landslide, saying the area around Guinsaugon "is not a logged area". However, local Congressman Roger Mercado said that, while large-scale logging ceased 10 years ago, the present situation was a legacy of that logging. Army captain Edmund Abella, head of one of the rescue teams, said local people blamed "small,

widespread chainsaw logging” in the area.

Whether or not illegal logging was a contributing factor, the area is notoriously unstable geologically. In December 2003, mudslides in Southern Leyte and northeastern Mindanao claimed around 300 lives. The worst affected were a number of villages on the small island of Panaon.

Then as now, President Arroyo expressed sympathy for the victims and promised to take action. The government’s Mines and Geosciences Bureau (GMB) initiated a geohazard mapping project to identify vulnerable zones. The study found that the rock structure of the mountains surrounding many of the towns was “badly broken and fragmented” because of “numerous faults and major fractures,” making it particularly susceptible to landslides after heavy rain.

The GMB report stated: “Clearly, disaster preparedness measures must be sharpened and an early warning system established in order to prevent other tragedies similar to Panaon Island and Surigao from happening again.” Along with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, the GMB developed an “action plan” to establish an early warning system and to undertake preventative measures.

According to a *Philippine Star* report, the village of Guinsaugon was one of the areas deemed “unfit for dwelling” and recommended for evacuation. An official from the Department of Environment and Natural resources told the newspaper: “There should be no community existing there.”

In December 2004, more than 1,000 people died when flash flooding and landslides hit the eastern Quezon province in the northern Philippines after two large tropical storms. Three coastal towns—Real, Infanta and General Nakar—were the worst affected. Illegal logging was again cited as a major contributing factor to the tragedy.

Arroyo reacted by banning logging in the areas and threatening draconian punishments for illegal loggers. “We are determined to make those responsible for widespread death and destruction pay the price for their misdeeds,” she declared. “We shall prosecute them the way we do terrorists, kidnappers, drug traffickers and other heinous criminals.”

Little changed, however. The Arroyo administration has no solution to the terrible poverty that afflicts many

rural areas in the Philippines and that drives many to eke out a living through illegal logging and mining operations. The larger operators and businessmen have been left largely untouched. Preventative measures such as early warning systems have not been put in place and emergency services remain adequate.

Following the latest tragedy, 11 villages near Guinsaugon have been evacuated. Pointing to illegal logging and mining, Senator Jamby Madrigal warned: “[U]nless the government demonstrates the political will to address the serious threats to the environment, our country will become a no man’s land.”

But once the publicity has died away, all of the promises and expressions of concern by politicians at the local, national and international levels will be shelved and the poverty-stricken villages of Southern Leyte and other vulnerable areas of the Philippines will be left to fend for themselves until the next disaster.



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