

Hundreds killed as Typhoon Durian lashes the Philippines and Vietnam

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Typhoon Durian has wreaked havoc in parts of the Philippines and Vietnam over the past week, leaving hundreds dead and many more homeless without food, water and medicine.

Among the worst-affected areas was Albay province, 320 kilometres south of the Philippines capital of Manila. Torrential rain caused a massive slide of mud, rocks and volcanic ash from the slopes of the Mount Mayon volcano. It engulfed more than 700 villages and devastated essential infrastructure, including transport, communications and power.

As of yesterday, the official death toll in the Philippines had risen to 543, with another 740 missing. By Tuesday, rescue efforts to find those missing were being scaled back. More than 1.5 million people have been affected, 250,000 houses have been damaged or destroyed and over 80,000 people have sought shelter in evacuation centres.

Durian, classified as a category 4 typhoon, was the worst of four to hit the Philippines over the past three months. It weakened to a tropical storm before reaching Vietnam, but nevertheless created widespread damage in five southern provinces. The death toll in Vietnam climbed to 59 yesterday. Strong winds and rain damaged or destroyed more than 18,000 homes and sank hundreds of fishing boats.

In the Philippines, Red Cross official Richard Gordon described the affected area in Albay province as a “war zone”. “There are many unidentified bodies. There could be more hidden below. Families may have been wiped out,” he told the media.

In Maipon, a local man who was digging in the mud where his house had been for the bodies of his son and wife, told reporters: “Nobody had time to react. My wife and son were snatched from my arms and were gone in an instant”. Mass burials began on Friday to try

to avoid the danger of disease. Poor farmers had streamed into the region’s main city of Legaspi from the surrounding countryside to seek shelter and food.

But Legaspi itself was torn apart by the fierce winds. Most of the Bicol peninsula near Legaspi is still without electricity. As of yesterday, the earliest target for the restoration of temporary power was Christmas Eve—more than a fortnight away.

On Saturday, roads had yet to be cleared throughout the region. Rescue teams had not reached communities isolated since the typhoon hit on December 1. Media reports said all that was left of many villages that dotted the slopes of Mayon were broken bamboo poles sticking out of the mud.

Provincial governor Fernando Gonzales told the media: “The disaster covered almost every corner of this province. It is total devastation.” He said it would take years for the area’s economy, which was heavily dependent on coconut plantations, to recover. About 30 percent of the land inundated with mud and ash was planted with coconut palms. “It will take three years to replant and up to seven years before they can start bearing fruit again,” Gonzales estimated.

Philippines President Gloria Arroyo formally declared a state of national calamity on Sunday, allowing her to deploy the army, but aid to Albay province has been limited. The country’s national disaster coordinating centre has appealed for donations of medicine, tents and food. Water containers and water purifiers are needed urgently because of the lack of clean water and fears of an outbreak of water-borne disease.

Arroyo visited the devastated area for the first time on Tuesday in a bid to contain anger and resentment over the slow pace of assistance. She initially released just \$US20 million for rescue and reconstruction, but

promised to consider spending up to \$300 million as the full extent of the calamity became clear.

One reason for the high death toll was the number of villages that had sprung up around Mount Mayon, which is also a tourist attraction. Local officials warned residents several times this year when the volcano showed signs of erupting, but no scientific assessment was made of the dangers of a mudslide. Many villagers thought they were safe because they lived outside a four-kilometre radius “permanent danger zone,” calculated on the basis of eruption.

Disasters like Typhoon Durian are routinely presented as natural calamities that little can be done to avert, but steps could have been taken to prevent the high death toll and widespread destruction. Glenn Rabonza, head of the National Disaster Coordinating Council, has belatedly announced a study of Mount Mayon’s topography to identify danger zones where rebuilding should be banned.

There is little concern prior to such disasters because the victims are inevitably for the most part the urban and rural poor. Prior to Typhoon Durian, nearly 1,300 people had already died this year in typhoons in the Philippines. In September, 213 people were killed when Typhoon Xangsane hit the north and centre of the country, leaving millions without electricity or running water for days.

With a well-developed disaster plan, much of the death and destruction in the latest calamity could have been avoided. On November 29, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration warned that Durian could develop into a super typhoon. The warning specifically identified the Bicol region as being in danger.

In an editorial on December 5, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* called on the government to take greater precautionary measures. The newspaper noted that a timely warning could have allowed people living near the Mayon volcano to evacuate. It appealed for the purchase of state-of-the-art weather forecasting equipment and a massive program of reforestation to stabilise slopes such as Mount Mayon.

One can predict in advance, however, that President Arroyo will pay no more than lip service to such suggestions. Her main concern at present is to contain any political fallout from the disaster and then get on with business as usual. Far from providing money to

bolster essential services, Arroyo’s administration has been implementing the IMF dictates to rein in government spending.

The international response has been limited. The first supplies of food and medicine arrived on Tuesday—12 tonnes from Indonesia. Australia conveyed its condolences via its ambassador and made an initial pledge of \$US780,000. Canada donated \$876,000 and Japan promised \$US173,000. The token emergency assistance underlines again the contempt of the leaders of the major powers for the impoverished masses of countries like the Philippines, whose only function is to provide a potential source of cheap labour for the global corporations.

Nearly two years after the devastating December 2004 tsunami laid waste to large areas of coastal Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the fate of its victims has been quietly buried by the international media and political leaders. Yet hundreds of thousands of people whose lives were torn apart by that terrible event are still without proper accommodation, jobs and essential services.



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