

Typhoon Morakot devastates Taiwan

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Anger is mounting in Taiwan over the Kuomintang government's inadequate emergency response and its failure to quickly rescue the victims of Typhoon Morakot, which devastated the island last week.

The typhoon also killed 23 people in the Philippines while six died in southern China, where 10,000 homes were destroyed and 1.5 million people evacuated. The most serious damage and highest loss of life, however, was in Taiwan where hundreds of villagers were buried in mudslides. Southern Taiwan was the hardest hit, with up to three metres of rain falling between August 7 and 8, producing Taiwan's worst floods in 50 years.

Typhoon Morakot also destroyed a six-storey hotel, 34 bridges, 253 roads, thousands of homes, severed three undersea fiber-optic cables and damaged three others, causing major disruption to Internet connections in Asia.

While 125 are now officially listed as dead, Taiwan's president Ma Ying-jeou admitted on Friday that the final toll would exceed 500.

Hundreds are still missing, especially in the country's mountainous areas, where mudslides buried entire villages. Over 10,000 people, many of them from the island's oppressed aboriginal minority, are trapped and without food in isolated townships following the destruction of road, rail and other transport links.

The worst hit was Xiaolin village, in Kaohsiung county, which was buried by mudslides that flattened over 390 houses and killed an estimated 300 people. Only two homes remain standing in the village.

A Kaohsiung firefighter, Su Yu-ming, told the *China Post* that the official estimate of over 300 buried alive was probably understated because only 150 of the village's 1,300 recorded residents had been evacuated. He believed that at least 600 villagers had been killed. Another firefighter explained that rescue operations were more difficult than after the massive earthquake that hit Taiwan in September 1999 and killed 2,400 people.

Meanwhile, around 1,000 people in Taoyuan township and 1,500 in Namasiya were trapped. *Taipei Times*

reported that the reservoir burst at noon on last Thursday. Fortunately, downstream villagers escaped 30 minutes before the collapse. But the rapidly moving flood waters damaged a warehouse containing 8,000 kilograms of explosives, pushing them into the Laonong River, and posing new dangers for residents and rescuers.

According to an emergency operations centre in Chiayi on August 14 over 10,000 people were still trapped in the townships of Alishan, Meishan, Chuchi, Jhongpu and Fanlu. One Fanlu resident told SET-TV that survivors were running out of food: "We only have about one or two days of food supplies. A helicopter came a couple of days ago to drop off food and other supplies, but it happened only once."

The *Taipei Times* reported that a primary school teacher was stranded for six days in Jinfong township in the mountainous Taitung county, before sending a desperate email appealing for help. The email explained that over 1,000 people had been cut off by a massive mudslide and that survivors were on the verge of starvation. "Even greens and taro roots gathered in the wild have been consumed," the message said.

An estimated 16,000 people were trapped in other Taitung county townships that were cut off by the flooded Taimali River and completely dependent on supplies dropped by helicopter.

Hostility is building toward President Ma, who initially refused to accept foreign aid and failed to fully mobilise the military. A TVBS survey found that 52 percent of those questioned were "dissatisfied" with the central government over its response to the typhoon and 53 percent "lacked faith" in Ma's ability to handle future disasters. In fact, Ma did not call a national security meeting until Friday and then blamed the cabinet for failing to evacuate villagers earlier.

Ma's Kuomintang (KMT) government only appealed for foreign assistance on August 13, after it became clear that the government's resources were inadequate and unable to deal with the crisis. Calls were then made for large helicopters capable of carrying heavy earth-moving

machinery. Taiwan also appealed for hundreds of tonnes of disinfectants, 1,500 sterilising units and 1,000 prefab homes. The government sent an additional 4,000 more troops, bringing the total to 10,000 involved in rescue and relief operations.

The *South China Morning Post* on August 13 reported the angry reaction of storm victims during Ma's tour to southern Taiwan: "Television footage showed dozens of people surrounding Mr. Ma in Tainan county where at least 23 people were killed ... 'What is the government doing? It's too late, they cannot be saved,' said an angry man."

Chen Ding-hsiang, 45, whose wife went missing on August 7, told *Bloomberg News*: "Every time there is an earthquake, typhoon or natural disaster, we have to be worried for our lives," said. "Why is it that the government always closes roads and bridges after they have collapsed?"

Public anger increased when one soldier revealed that his unit was the only one in southern Taiwan that had the heavy equipment required for relief efforts. But four days after the typhoon struck, his unit had not yet been mobilised for relief operations. The defence ministry responded by insisting that despite the desire of troops to help survivors, they should strictly follow central government orders.

Ma issued a series of apologetic statements in southern Taiwan, the worst affected part of the island, fearful that the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which has substantial support in the area, would whip up anti-KMT sentiment. But the DPP is equally culpable for the grossly inadequate emergency response, having failed to establish effective disaster measures during its rule from 2000 to 2008.

A *Taipei Times* editorial on August 14 attacked Ma's leadership as "incompetent". It noted that international experts who studied the massive 1999 earthquake warned that the country's emergency response was characterised by poor communications, no central command, lack of cooperation between government and the military, and various medical logistics problems that required immediate government attention.

Fearful that popular hostility against the government, and its DPP predecessor, could escalate out of control, the *Taipei Times* warned: "It would be preferable to say that discussion of political fallout from this disaster should wait until all victims are out of harm's way."

In the aftermath of the September 1999 earthquake the Taiwan government immediately mobilised 15,000 troops

and other emergency personnel in rescue operations. International aid was received within three days of the quake.

According to *Taiwan News Online*, one reason why Ma refused to issue an immediate call for international assistance following Typhoon Morakot because he feared that allowing US or Japanese emergency workers or even military rescue teams in Taiwan would strain his policy of "reconciliation" with Beijing. Ma wants to sign a free trade deal with China in order to economically fully integrate with the mainland.

Typhoon Morakot will impact on the country's export-led economy, already battered by the global financial crisis. Taiwan's exports fell 24.4 percent in July from the same period last year, after June's 30.4 percent drop. In the first quarter, Taiwan's GDP growth recorded an unprecedented annualised 10 percent contraction.

Taiwan's Council of Agriculture estimates that 27 percent of farmland crops were destroyed by Typhoon Morakot, including over 5,600 hectares of bananas. More than 6,000 hectares of fish farms were badly affected, along with the destruction of 5.31 million chickens, 922,000 ducks and 101,802 pigs. This has already translated into rising prices, with Taipei's Market Administration Office reporting on Thursday that city residents may have to pay 20-40 percent more for vegetables and fruit during the next month.

According to current estimates, the overall damage bill will be over \$US900 million and reconstruction costs are estimated to be at least \$3.6 billion, even higher than Typhoon Herbert in 1996 and the 1999 earthquake.



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