Typhoon causes widespread destruction in the Philippines

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A major storm struck the Philippine capital of Manila and surrounding provinces in Luzon last Saturday killing at least 246 people and causing over 435,000 to flee their flooded homes. In the areas outside the city, hundreds are missing, feared killed by major landslides.

The massive downpour from tropical storm Ketsana, called Ondoy in the Philippines, was caused by a monsoon combining with local storms. In six hours on Saturday, 41.6 centimetres of rain fell compared with the previous record for one day of 33.4 centimetres in July 1967. At one point, 80 percent of Manila was under up to six metres of water.

The speed with which the storm struck trapped motor vehicles in Manila's chaotic traffic, adding to the debris and hampering rescue workers and relief supplies. Thousands of people were trapped on rooftops waiting for rescue. According to figures compiled by the *Manila Bulletin*, the hardest hit metropolitan area was Marikina where 75 people were killed. In Pasig City and Quezon City, the death toll was 20 and 28 respectively. Most people were swept away by the surging floodwaters.

The Associated Press reported that a mother of five, Gingery Comprendio, left her children on her roof to alert authorities to a live electrical line. When she returned her family was gone. "The next day when I came back to our home I saw my eldest already dead and my aunt saw my other child buried in the mud."

Herminio Abahat, whose wife is still missing, said: "What happened was the water rose suddenly. We did not know that the water would reach the second floor, so we went up to the roof but the roof gave in, so we just floated in the water hanging onto a banana tree."

In areas around the capital, rescue efforts were delayed by damaged roads and bridges. The *Manila Bulletin* reported 98 people dead in Rizal province, 30 in Bulacan, 6 in Laguna. At Pampanga in Central Luzon at the foot of Mount Arayat, 12 people were killed in a landslide and 2,000 others were affected. At Benguet, a three-year-old child was killed when her house was engulfed by a landslide while her family was eating dinner.

Tropical storm Ketsana reached the central coast of Vietnam on Tuesday damaging the cities of Danang, Hoi An and Hue, a UNESCO World Heritage site. While over 170,000 people were evacuated in the region before the storm hit, at least 30 people were killed.

The administration of President Gloria Arroyo has declared a "state of calamity" in the capital and 25 affected provinces that have a population of 20 million. Arroyo called for calm and declared: "We're responding to the extent we can to this once-in-a lifetime typhoon emergency." Radio stations, however, have already received numbers of calls decrying the slowness and inadequacy of government relief efforts.

According to the *Philstar* website, there were still more than 115,000 people in some 600 makeshift evacuation centres in Manila as of Tuesday. Agence France Presse reporters described sanitation in the schools, gymnasiums and other emergency centres as "deplorable".

Health officials have warned of the danger of

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outbreaks of diarrhoea, dengue, measles, leptospirois and Influenza A (H1N1) in flooded areas, especially in the evacuation centres. Melissa Guerrero, chief aide to the Health Secretary, said: “Now that you have a breakdown in water (supply) and sanitation, the transmission of disease will be faster.” DOH chief epidemiologist Eric Tayag told the media that the shelters must have a supply of fresh water.

At Bagong Silangan Village in Quezon City, 3,000 people were crowded into an open-air gymnasium. They had to sleep and cook near human waste. Eleven bodies in coffins were also in the centre. The officer in charge, Captain Armando Endaya, said those in the centre had to fend for themselves or rely on private aid while they waited for government help.

Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro, who is in charge of relief efforts and heads the National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), has defended the government response. He pointed to the fact that 7,900 people had been rescued by Monday. NDCC deputy administrator Anthony Golez said the government was engaged in “massive relief operations”, but admitted “the system is overwhelmed’.

Conscious of the anger building up, Arroyo opened the presidential palace in Manila as a relief and evacuation centre. Teodoro announced that all cabinet ministers would donate two months salary to the Department of Social Welfare for flood victims and all government employees would receive their Christmas bonuses early.

However, such token gestures from Arroyo’s well-heeled cabinet are unlikely to stifle criticism.

Mario Taguiwalo of the National Institute for Policy Studies in Manila told the *Bloomberg* website that the government’s handling of the crisis was characterised by “a failure of planning, anticipation and management”. He added: “If you compare the number rescued versus the people at grave risk, they were reaching a very small percentage.”

Ramon Casiple of the Institute for Political and Elector Reform told Reuters said that the disaster has the potential to further erode support for an already unpopular government. “People are wondering how the government spent its budget for flood control. The government was caught unprepared,” he said.

Opposition Senator Loren Legarda told *Al Jazeera* that the Arroyo administration had been “totally incompetent and helpless in dealing with this natural disaster”.

“Natural disasters don’t have to turn to tragedies… The NDCC was totally unprepared for this. They should have allocated funds for local government units… to have basic equipment to rescue people … it is not the first time a typhoon has hit the Philippines,” she said.

The Philippines is particularly prone to tropical storms. In June last year, at least 730 people were killed when a typhoon struck the country. The urban and rural poor who invariably live in shoddy housing and areas prone to floods and landslides, are always the worst hit.

The Arroyo administration, like its predecessors, has done nothing to improve planning for such disasters, including warning systems as well as rescue and relief. Its gestures of concern and promises of support are simply aimed at placating people in the hope that the crisis will blow over until the next time.

While the floodwaters receded early this week, a new disaster is already looming. The US Navy’s Joint Typhoon Warning Centre has warned that tropical storm Parma could strengthen into a typhoon by Friday and reach flood-ravaged Luzon by Saturday.

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