

Death toll mounts in the wake of typhoon in the Philippines

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Forty three people have been reported dead, 17 of them children, in the wake of Typhoon Nesat in the Philippines. Thirty more are missing.

Much was initially made in the press of the flooding along the Manila water front. The US embassy situated adjacent to the Manila Yacht Club was surrounded by thigh-deep water. The Sofitel Philippine Plaza hotel had its pool area flooded and water was seeping into its luxury restaurant. The tourists staying there were quickly evacuated to other five-star hotels throughout the city.

Traverse the Manila Bay waterfront northward and you pass the reclaimed land supporting the glittering Mall of Asia, fourth largest mall in the world, pass the Manila Yacht Club and the US embassy, cross the Pasig River and arrive in Tondo. Tondo has been home to the Philippine working class for 150 years.

It is a cramped, noisome city of dilapidation, crooked alleyways, and fetid canals. Shantytowns stretch an uninterrupted patchwork of tarpaulin, cardboard, plywood and corrugated iron down to the rubble-strewn edge of the greasy waters of Manila Bay.

Desperate communities have formed here, scavenging from the refuse of the dumpsite at Pier 18. They burn scrap wood, and then bag and sell the charcoal. Children as young as four wander the charcoal pits with magnets, collecting rusted nails for resale. Their homes have been flattened, decimated by the typhoon. The mangled and twisted frames of their makeshift homes stagnate in ankle-deep floodwater.

The floodwaters throughout the city of Metro Manila, filling the working class communities of Tondo, San Juan, or Marikina, carry genuine health risk. Cases of leptospirosis, a frequently fatal disease borne in rat urine, inevitably soar during flooding. A growth in the incidence of leptospirosis is a telling marker of the

brutality of class exploitation.

On September 30, the Philippine Department of Health issued a statement that “People are advised to avoid swimming and wading in floodwaters, if it is unavoidable, wear proper protection like boots and gloves and other protective gears in the body.” When your home is underwater to be advised to avoid wading is ludicrous; when you are fortunate if you have a pair of rubber *tsinelas* to wear on your feet, to be told to wear boots, gloves and protective gear is a callous insult.

Typhoon Nesat left the Philippines on September 29, but the floodwaters in the central rice plains of Bulacan and portions of Nueva Ecija continue to rise. Local government officials describe the water level in the towns of Hagonoy and Calumpit as “*lampas tao*,” i.e., over the height of a person. Approximately 300,000 people live in these two towns and their homes are surrounded by water eight to ten feet deep, and the water level is rising.

The flooding is caused by the ongoing release of water over the spillway of the Angat and Ipo dams. The dam infrastructure has deliberately been underfunded and ill-maintained over the past decade as an excuse to justify the privatization of the Angat hydroelectric facilities. Angat dam is also the source of 97 percent of Metro Manila’s water. The rising water in the La Mesa reservoir behind Angat dam had been allowed to reach levels which imperiled the weakened structure. Dam authorities released the water onto Bulacan province.

There was no warning issued to the residents. Government agencies spent 24 hours denying that the dam had any role to play in the mounting floods. The government agencies involved in rescue missions and relief efforts now acknowledge that the floods engulfing the homes of hundreds of thousands of

people were caused by the dam. The national power corporation, NAPOCOR, still denies this, while the sun shines and the turgid, mud-brown water continues to rise.

The electricity was not shut off as the flood hit Hagonoy and Calumpit. The mounting water rose to the level of the poorly maintained power lines and the rat-chewed live wires in people's homes. A mother was shown on national television weeping over the loss of her 16-year-old son. He had died of electric shock when the floodwaters hit and his body was laid out on a bamboo slat bed and draped with a clear plastic tarp.

Thousands of residents have been stranded on their roofs for 48 hours, without access to food or potable water. Five-year-old children cling to trees, waiting for two days to be rescued. And the water continues to sluice over the spillway at Angat dam.

In 2008, a massive typhoon ravaged the city of Manila. The government efforts at rescue were late in coming, botched in execution, and grossly hampered by resources that had been pilfered by corrupt officials. Only two rubber boats were available. Politicians angrily denounced then President Arroyo's administration and promised to make the necessary changes to prevent a future catastrophe. Reports on Wednesday revealed that the government had precisely two rubber boats with which to conduct its relief efforts. Extra boats were ordered from the southern islands of Iloilo and Cebu.

In 2009, flood waters engulfed 80 percent of the province of Pangasinan. Homes were covered in water 10 feet deep and residents stranded on their roofs. More than 300 people died in the floods. The floods were caused by the sudden release of water from the San Roque hydroelectric dam. The dam had been privatized in 2003, but no maintenance had been done and the structure was cracking. The San Roque Power Corporation was not yet been held liable for any of the damage caused.

The political representatives of the interests of the bourgeoisie, the Senators and Congressmen of the Philippines have ventured out from their elevated and well-drained homes for photo-ops at the evacuation centers. They hand out a sack of rice or two, smile for the press and leave. Tens of thousands of people remain behind in these centers of squalor—sleeping side by side on mats on the floor, waiting for the flood to subside so

that they can return home, trying frantically to contact missing family members.

Not every public official can spare the time for a photo op, however. The heads of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), responsible for the coordination of the rescue efforts, donned hardhats and stood around looking concerned while their photo was taken—in a studio. It was then photo-shopped onto a scene of devastation and distributed to the press.

The ruse was quickly discovered and spoofs of the image widely disseminated on Facebook. The officials can now be seen in their hardhats looking concerned during a Manny Pacquiao boxing match, in midst of a fastfood restaurant, or on the beach at a tourist resort.

The tragedy of Typhoon Nesat was caused by staggering levels of class inequality and by the pursuit of profit in complete disregard for its effects upon human lives. San Roque Dam has now opened its spillway over Pangasinan; Angat dam continues to flood Bulacan. A fresh typhoon is poised to hit the Philippines tomorrow, wreaking further havoc upon the lives of the poor and the working class.



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