

Philippines: Hundreds dead and missing in flash flooding

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Flash flooding and landslides have killed over 650 people in the Philippines after Tropical Storm Washi struck the southern island of Mindanao on Friday. More than 900 people are missing, many of whom are feared dead.

Most of the dead and the missing are from the towns of Cagayan de Oro and Iligan in Northern Mindanao. Large sections of these towns have been devastated by the floods, with up to 70 percent of the housing destroyed in the most severely affected areas. Whole villages have reportedly been swept away. According to government officials, around 100,000 people have been displaced by the floods.

Floodwaters rapidly rose Friday night, and early Saturday morning, trapping many residents as they slept. According to some reports, waters rose by nearly four metres in the space of an hour in some areas.

Mary Ann Malancio from Iligan told the *New York Times* that she had feared for a co-worker who sent her a text message Saturday morning. "I called him and he said in a very quiet voice, 'The water is up to our stomachs, and we can't get out. The current is strong'." The phone line went dead. Malancio's colleague, along with his wife and 10-year-old child were not at their home on Sunday. "We walked back to our place and could see the bodies of dead people and animals along the road...I have never seen a tragedy like this in my life," she said.

Aid agencies have predicted that the death toll could rise considerably in the coming days. Gwen Pang, secretary general of the Philippine National Red Cross, said: "The affected area is so wide and huge and I

believe they have not really gone to all areas to do a search. Also, many of the houses were washed out, so that means the houses and the bodies were displaced." In addition, there are fears that the deaths of whole families who were swept away by the flooding may go unreported.

Undertakers are reportedly turning away the families of the dead and running out of coffins. Bodies remaining in the muddied streets are beginning to decompose, prompting fears of a health crisis. Residents have reportedly been told to bury their own dead, and officials in Iligan are burying unclaimed bodies in a mass grave today.

Many areas are suffering from power outages and a lack of clean water. In the worst-affected areas, water supplies are down to 10 percent, and it is feared that survivors will have to drink dirty water. In addition, over 35,000 people are staying in poorly equipped and over-crowded evacuation centres.

Although the Philippines is regularly affected by tropical storms and typhoons, the scale of the flooding is unusual for the Mindanao region. Moreover, the severity of the floods was compounded by the subordination of public safety to the profit interests of major timber companies. President Benigno Aquino has at times postured against logging, even issuing an order in February that formally halted certain timber operations, including in the Northern Mindanao area. However, the measure involved little more than the issuance of a paper decree, with deforestation continuing unabated. Aquino also exempted mining companies from bans on logging in the area.

Philippine congressman Rafael Mariano and Pamalakaya, an activist organisation representing fishermen, have denounced logging operations in the region, and pointed to their relationship to the floods. Mariano, who was quoted on the *Allvoices* website, described the floods as a “disaster waiting to happen.” He pointed to statistics from the Centre for Environmental Concerns, indicating that the Philippines has only around 6 percent of original forestation, with more than 157,400 hectares of forest lost to logging each year. Pamalakaya’s national chair Fernando Hicap dismissed Aquino’s February order as a mere scrap of paper, saying: “This carnage is brought about by the perpetual business of large scale mining and logging.”

The presidential adviser on the environment, Nereus Acosta, has admitted that the scale of the flooding was compounded by the deforestation of the watersheds of Mindanao’s major rivers. “When you tamper with the watersheds and the forests, we become vulnerable,” he told the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. According to the country’s Mines and Geosciences Bureau Chief Leo Jasareno, rapid urbanisation has decreased the capacity of Cagayan de Oro and Iligan to absorb run-off water and has caused siltation of the Cagayan River, contributing to the severity of the floods. Many of the flood victims in Iligan lived on a small island between two of the city’s rivers, in shanty houses that were swept away by the floodwaters.

Residents of affected areas said they were given minimal warning of the flooding, and no sense of the scale of the impending disaster. One 26-year-old mother whose two children died in the flooding, Gemylyn Lopez, told the *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*: “No question about it, we would have evacuated if we had known this would happen...The water just suddenly rose and we didn’t know what to do.”

The mayor of Cagayan de Oro complained that the town was given no warning of the scale of the impending storms. Government officials claimed that they issued warnings a few days before the floods, and sought to place the blame on affected residents, accusing them of complacency. However, the

government made no attempt to pre-emptively evacuate residents, leaving them to their own fate.

Aquino will make a stage-managed tour of flood-affected areas tomorrow. His government has reportedly deployed 20,000 soldiers to assist with the flood aftermath, but with hundreds dead, and whole areas destroyed, it is too little too late. Deputy presidential spokesperson Abigail Valte summed up the evasive response of the Aquino administration to the disaster, saying that the government would assess responsibility for the disaster sometime in the undefined future. “At this point, we should not focus first on accountability but rather on helping [the victims],” he said.

Like the Thai floods that began in October, the disaster in the Philippines has underscored the subordination of the safety of ordinary working people to the logging companies, property developers and corporate interests. The lack of adequate warning systems before the floods and the limited assistance now being provided are not only an indictment of the Aquino administration but the profit system itself.



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