

Scores killed in Manila floods

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Heavy rains generated by a southwest monsoon flooded 80 percent of the Philippines capital, Manila, and surrounding areas this week. Flood levels reached three metres in parts of Manila, where burst dams, neglected drainage systems and crowded slums worsened the disaster.

Rain has been falling in the area for two weeks, but the region was hardest hit by downpours on Tuesday and Wednesday. In just 48 hours, more than the average rainfall for the entire month of August was dumped on the capital. In a one-hour period on Wednesday night, 54.7 millimetres fell, almost equalling the record one-hour burst of 56.58 millimetres in September 2009, when monsoon rains killed about 700 people.

The rain eased yesterday, and some power and communications were restored, but meteorological officials warned of further storms.

Residents of low-lying areas in the sprawling capital, whose population exceeds 12 million, were severely affected. "We were totally washed out," Rudy Aquino, a flower shop owner, told Associated Press yesterday. More than three metres of rampaging floodwaters had swamped his neighbourhood, carrying all sorts of garbage. Aquino, whose shop also was hit in 2009, said he had been moving to a safer location when the deluge engulfed his business.

In Manila's Marikina city, rescuers on rubber boats floated down still-flooded streets to reach thousands of residents marooned in submerged houses along the Marikina River.

Six provinces surrounding the 16 cities and towns that make up Metro Manila have been placed under "a state of calamity". They include the rice-producing provinces of Bataan, Bulacan and Pampanga. Government agriculture officials estimated the damage to crops in these provinces at 167.9 million pesos (\$US4.02 million).

Philippine Yesterday, newspaper statistics from disaster management field units that showed the death toll was 43. Reports from Reuters and other news services put the toll as high as 91, following two weeks of heavy rain.

National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) figures showed 2.11 million people, or 460,273 families, had been affected, of whom 580,079 persons, or 119,751 families, had been displaced. As of yesterday, 314,795 people, or 66,577 families, were housed in 630 evacuation centres.

Deaths have been caused by drowning, electrocution and landslides. Worst affected were the working class areas and shanty towns, many of which are located on the river banks, creeks, storm drains and canals that crisscross Metro Manila. A landslide buried houses in a working class area of Quezon City in northern Manila on Tuesday. Nine bodies were recovered of one family, including those of three children and one three-week-old infant.

On Tuesday, the government ordered the cessation of all work in government and private offices, and the closure of schools in Metro Manila and the provinces of Zambales, Bataan, Pampanga, Pangasinan, Tarlac, Bulacan, Laguna, Cavite and Rizal.

Health Secretary Enrique Ona warned of a possible spike in diarrhea-related and water-borne diseases, and threats to the water supply. Public Works Secretary Rogelio Singson said the government would supply water treatment equipment to hospitals.

As with last year's floods in Manila and the southern Philippines, President Benigno Aquino has been very visible, along with senior members of his government. Aquino chaired the NDRRMC meeting in Quezon City's Camp Aguinaldo on Tuesday, with key ministers. The president toured shelters and distributed food and water, and promised, once again, to move shanty towns from the river banks and coastal areas,

and relocate people to safer ground.

Aquino's cameo appearances belie the culpability of the country's political elite for the extent of the disaster and the inadequate response to it.

On Wednesday, emergency crews were asking for more rubber boats to rescue tens of thousands of people trapped by the flood waters. The military had deployed 200 boats but, as in 2011, local government authorities were unprepared. Even when available, the flimsy boats were inadequate for the task. *Zamboanga Today Online* reported rescue officials in some areas saying it was too dangerous to reach stranded people. One official said: "The current is too strong so we have to tie our rubber boats with ropes to keep them from being swept away."

One reason for the strong currents in Manila and surrounding areas was the neglected and run-down dam infrastructure, which was also a major factor in last year's flooding. Five dams on Luzon island—Ipo, Ambuklao, Binga, San Roque and Magat—reached critical levels and released water causing wide areas of flooding.

Pangasinan Provincial Administrator Rafael Baraan said the release of water from the San Roque dam had badly affected low-lying towns in the eastern part of the province, including San Fabian, Mangaldan, San Nicolas, Tayug, St. Maria and Rosales. The flood waters in Manila were aggravated by a spillover from the La Mesa dam.

Urban planners told Agence France-Presse the floods were a "man-made disaster". Nathaniel Einseidel said there was plenty of technical expertise and finance in the Philippines to solve flood problems, but no political will. There were no long-term plans, he said. "I haven't heard of a local government, a town or city that has a comprehensive drainage plan."

Some politicians, Einseidel said, wanted to keep squatters in their existing locations to secure their votes. "With the increasing number of people occupying danger zones, it is inevitable there are a lot of people who are endangered when these things happen," he said.

Architect Paulo Alcazaren said environmentally vital forested areas on the outskirts of Manila had been destroyed so developers could proceed with housing estates for middle and upper class customers.

The experts said solutions to the flooding would all

require massive programs, costing billions of pesos, including replanting the watersheds, building low-cost housing for the squatters and clearing the drainage systems.

After the 2009 disaster, a government report called for the relocation of 2.7 million people in shanty towns along the danger zones of riverbanks, lakes and sewers. It would have cost 130 billion pesos (\$US2.77 billion) and taken 10 years to complete. Nothing was done.

Instead, President Aquino's administration has been ruthlessly and relentlessly pursuing a policy of forcibly relocating the urban poor onto other floodplains, on the outskirts of Manila, to make way for condominium and retail development (see: "Demonstrator shot dead in housing demolition in the Philippines").



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