

Scores dead as typhoon hits the Philippines

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At least 80 people have been reported dead in the Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Bopha (local name Pablo). Bopha made landfall yesterday on the southeastern coast of Mindanao, the country's southernmost and second largest island. Over 60,000 people were forced to move into makeshift evacuation centers.

Bopha was classified as a category 5 super typhoon, with wind speeds of 160 miles per hour, making it the strongest ever to hit Mindanao. Slightly less than a year ago, Mindanao was struck by Typhoon Washi (Sendong), which followed a similar path to Bopha and resulted in the death of more than 1,200 people.

Typhoons are an uncommon occurrence in Mindanao. Its proximity to the equator means that a storm has to form unusually far to the south for their northward parabolic trajectory to hit the island. Bopha is the second most southerly typhoon on record, surpassed only by Typhoon Kate in 1970.

The deaths thus far reported have resulted from landslides, flash floods and falling trees and power lines. But the underlying cause is poverty.

When a storm like Bopha hits an economically backward country such as the Philippines, it shreds the flimsy infrastructure. Video footage shows the wind ripping off the rusty corrugated roofs of dilapidated homes; an entire fishing village reduced to a heap of plywood, muddy sand and abandoned nets; and a community marketplace collapsed under the weight of wind and rain.

Forty-four of the confirmed deaths occurred in the municipality of New Bataan in the Compostela Valley. Various news reports state that a mudslide washed out the location to which they had been evacuated. The dead include men, women and children. Forty-three bodies were recovered and laid out side by side on the floor of a government building.

Elsewhere in the Compostela Valley, three children

were killed in a mudslide. Their bodies were recovered by their parents, wrapped in family blankets and laid out on the community basketball court.

Twenty-three people died in a flash flood in the town of Cateel. Photos show logs and large debris being carried along by the rushing flood waters.

Cateel and the Compostela Valley are on the flanks of Mount Diwalwal. Gold mining is being carried out there on a massive scale. The majority of families who live on the slopes of Diwalwal eke out a living in the area's unregulated mines, collecting the washed off tailings and cleaning them, with bare hands, in mercury baths. Many of these workers are children as young as 11.

In January this year, a mudslide on the slopes of Diwalwal buried at least 36 miners and their families, including children as young as 3 or 4 years old. (See: "Landslide in Philippine mining community kills at least 36")

The Philippine government classifies most of these mines as small-scale, which is legally defined as any mining activity that is artisanal in nature and does not employ heavy machinery. The lie promoted in the Philippine media is that these small-scale miners are of their own accord digging unsafely in the side of Diwalwal in the hope of striking it rich.

The so-called small-scale mining concerns in Diwalwal are multi-million dollar corporations owned by local businessmen with intimate ties to leading political figures and military leaders. They employ the workers who have been repeatedly buried in the mudslides and flashfloods on the slopes of Diwalwal, working them to the bone and maintaining them in the most degrading of living conditions.

The more than 60,000 residents now in evacuation shelters are sleeping on scraps of cardboard on the floors of local basketball courts or municipal auditoriums. In the wake of Typhoon Washi, thousands

of the residents of Mindanao were forced to live in evacuation shelters for months. They are now being forced back into the same shelters. The squalid conditions there have not changed even slightly.

When the scandalously poor evacuation shelters were brought to national attention earlier in the year, the Aquino administration responded with a publicity stunt, flying in apl.de.ap of the Black-Eyed Peas to entertain the evacuated population.

Now the bitterness is palpable. Sixty-year-old Puriza Siao told *MindaNews*: “I never imagined that I will spend another night here. In just less than a year, me and my family are occupying the same space.”



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