

# Death toll from Philippine typhoon exceeds 600

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Six days have passed since Typhoon Bopha (local name Pablo) struck the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines. More than 600 people have been reported dead, while hundreds more remain missing. The conservative estimate released by the Philippine National Disaster and Risk Reduction Management Council (NDRRMC) is that at least 800 people died in the storm.

The failure of the administration of Philippine President Aquino to respond to the crisis in Mindanao has been inexcusable.

At least 100 of the deaths were the result of collapsed or buried evacuation centers. Many residents of Compostela Valley were forced by government officials to leave their homes when the typhoon hit, and move into evacuation shelters. The shelters were poorly and cheaply constructed, and several were built in the natural path of mudslides.

One woman recounted to the press how she had been forced to evacuate her home. She “dutifully had bundled her toddler and infant to the designated town gym. And then the evacuees’ shelter collapsed, killing the children.” Another reported how after having been rescued from the debris of the evacuation shelter, she found her home still standing. Her husband and son were never found.

About 212,000 people are now living in 291 evacuation centers. The centers are grotesquely overcrowded. In the Compostela Valley, the area hardest hit by the storm, 69,849 people have been crammed into three community auditoriums.

The stench of death hangs in the air. Rotting corpses are still being found wedged in trees or partially buried under rubble. A resident told interviewers, “they could

not be hauled or pulled out from the debris of trees and rocks because they’re decomposing, and the skin and muscles could only be pulled easily from their bones.” Workers are collecting the bodies wearing plastic bags on their hands for gloves and placing them in mass graves.

A significant portion of the evacuated population is without food and water. The Department of Social Welfare and Development stated on Wednesday that it was running out of relief supplies after it had given out 3,000 relief packs in Compostela Valley and 4,000 in Davao Oriental. This is for more than 200,000 people. Each relief pack contained three kilos of rice, three cans of sardines and four packs of instant noodles.

The evacuated residents in the Compostela Valley have taken to eating mashed under-ripe bananas and rice. The bananas are collected from the nearby plantations, which were devastated by the storm.

Children are begging for food along the roadside. Passing truck drivers give out occasional items, but no organized relief goods are arriving.

The hungry have broken into closed shops and warehouses. Cedric Daep, a provincial public safety official in Davao Oriental, told AFP: “The food aid took so long to arrive that the locals broke into whatever building was left standing in search of something to eat.”

The military spokesman for the Aquino administration’s relief efforts, Colonel Lyndon Panisa, publicly denied that any break-ins had occurred. Nevertheless, this government, which has been either unable or unwilling to organize even a meager ration of food, quickly responded by imposing a military-enforced curfew, and ordering the police to guard stores

and shops to prevent “looting.”

Rather than distribute adequate relief goods, the Aquino government has, with staggering callousness, proposed instituting a “cash- or food-for-work program.” Profit can be made in the midst of abject human suffering.

The population is also in desperate need of medical supplies, in particular antibiotics and anti-tetanus shots. Nothing has been distributed. Local hospitals are selling the supplies. Gina Montejo, an evacuee of the Compostela Valley, spoke with the *Business Mirror*: “How do these hospitals expect us to buy these, when all we’ve got are our lives back from the mud? My husband and my son are still missing, and how will I be able to buy this prescription?” Her prescription cost P1,000 (\$US25).

Compostela Valley residents are also without clean water. The supply is cut off and bottled water has not been provided. People have taken to drinking ground water. With decomposing bodies buried in shallow mud, and 69,000 people in three local evacuation centers, this is an epidemiological flashpoint. These are the conditions that breed cholera, typhoid and other diseases of squalor.

Aquino’s press secretary responded to the situation by pointing out the need for “the cooperation of the evacuees themselves to keep their areas clean.”

The Philippines has some of the most densely populated rural land in the world. Hundreds of thousands of people live in conditions that combine the backwardness of impoverished rural life and the density and dinginess of the city. Even the isolated corners of Mindanao are crowded. The majority of the residents of the towns hardest hit by Bopha were migrants, who travelled to the Compostela Valley in the hopes of working in or around the small-scale gold mining corporations that employ exploited artisanal labor to dredge up profit from the Diwalwal mountainside. The conditions are horrifying.

In the past two years, in one town alone, Pantukan, three major mudslides occurred. In April 2011, 23

villagers were buried; January saw 16 buried, including a six-year-old girl; 27 were buried several months later. This is but one town.

President Aquino has sought to use these landslides to criticize the small-scale multi-million dollar corporations that mine the area. There is no concern whatsoever for the suffering of the workers in this stance, as the response to the victims of Bopha demonstrates. This is, rather, part of a move by his administration to push for the entrance of massive foreign mining interests in the region. As the mud and mess of human suffering is slowly cleaned out of Compostela Valley, Aquino will no doubt use Bopha as a further justification to push this agenda.



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