

Philippine typhoon victims storm government offices

Dylan Lubao
7 March 2013

On the morning of February 26, approximately 3,000 victims of last December's Typhoon Pablo (Bopha) stormed government offices in Davao City, on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. The crowd overwhelmed a small contingent of security guards at the regional office of the federal Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and carried away a stash of emergency relief goods, including sacks of rice and boxes of instant noodles.

Riot police were deployed to suppress the action. Several protesters reported being beaten with police batons. A reporter covering the incident was assaulted by the police and forcibly removed from the scene. Following the altercation, protest organizers began distributing the supplies to the thousands in attendance. Carlos Trangia, the spokesman for Barug Katawhan, a group of typhoon survivors that organized the protest, offered to conduct the distribution under police scrutiny.

Some participants had traveled as far as 220 kilometers from their homes in neighboring provinces, and had not eaten for 24 hours. They all made the journey to plead with the DSWD to release supplies that had been withheld for over a month. The desperation and anger within the crowd was palpable, prompting the regional police headquarters to radio for additional units.

Typhoon Pablo tore through the southeastern coast of Mindanao on December 4, leaving 1,146 people dead, with another 834 still missing. More than 216,000 houses were damaged, and entire communities were reduced to fields of broken plywood and corrugated metal.

The area hardest hit was the Compostela Valley, which is categorized as a 'red area' that is fiercely contested by the Philippine military and the New

Peoples Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The NPA competes with the military over the extraction of fees for the provision of 'security' to the small-scale gold mining and logging operations in the area.

The distribution of relief goods to the typhoon victims has been under the control of the military and has been exploited to starve out the NPA and its supporters. The distribution is being monitored through the use of DSWD family access cards, requiring identity verification and the signatures of local government officials. Hunger and desperation have mounted as the distribution of relief goods continued to be stockpiled.

On January 15, the Barug Katawhan survivors' group organized a highway roadblock in the Compostela Valley that drew over 7,000 participants. They denounced the national and provincial governments for the unfair distribution of relief goods and for environmental degradation. The Barug Katawhan leaders told the assembled group to disperse when DSWD Secretary Corazon 'Dinky' Soliman promised that 10,000 sacks of rice would be delivered within two days.

By February 26, this promise had not been fulfilled. The DSWD declared that it could only distribute the rice if the protest leaders could gather the signatures of every beneficiary and develop a distribution scheme. This demand for a list of names would expose the participants in the January protest to grave danger from the military, which is infamous for assassinating outspoken community leaders.

Bello Tindasan, Barug Katawhan's farmer sector leader, commented: "We have received threats from the military, saying that those who joined the (January 15) barricade were members of the NPA." Army

allegations that worker and rural poor groups have ties to the NPA are routinely cited to justify military operations against these disenfranchised communities.

The office's Regional Director Prescilla Razon appealed to the Barug Katawhan leaders for a "dialogue," ostensibly to discuss the terms of the long-overdue transfer of relief goods. In all likelihood, however, this was yet another stalling tactic.

The 3,000 typhoon victims who seized emergency relief goods from the DSWD office in Davao were motivated by hunger and desperation. Their leadership, however, was playing a very different game.

The targeting of the DSWD office appears to be a political ploy by the CPP legal front organization Bayan and its political coalition Makabayan. All the publicly mentioned leaders of Barug Katawhan are members of Bayan organizations. Staging the event in Davao provided an opportunity for enhanced media coverage during the campaign for the upcoming mid-term election in May.

The storming of the DSWD office was conveniently timed for the Mindanao campaign of Teddy Casino, the senatorial candidate of Makabayan. He showed up at the protest, sang a few songs, and gave an interview. A Bayan organization, the League of Filipino Students, held a support rally in Manila, during which it staged a variation on the popular Harlem Shake dance, dubbed the "Dinky Shake," after the DSWD head.

On February 27, the Barug Katawhan leadership held a four-hour closed-door negotiation with the DSWD, leading to a seven-point agreement that differed little from the previous arrangement. The logistical burden of distributing relief goods still rests squarely on the shoulders of the afflicted. No timeframe was established for the distribution of the 10,000 sacks of rice. The main difference is that relief operations will only continue until June, a reduction of two months. DSWD official and negotiator Cezario Joel Espejo hailed this as "a happy ending."

Barug Katawhan spokesman Trangia thanked the DSWD and then directed the 3,000 occupants of the DSWD offices to return the seized food supplies under the watchful eye of the police. Hungry and exhausted, the protesters left with several hundred sacks of rice and the empty promises of the national government. By the end of the night, most of them had been bussed home.

The size of these protests underscores the rising anger of the typhoon victims, who have received precious little of the relief that was promised. Adding to the fiasco are recent corruption allegations against the DSWD.

June Sanchez-Obenza, a former community development assistant with the DSWD office in Davao City, has filed criminal and administrative complaints against several high-ranking officials—the acting director, human resources chief, a financial analyst and the community infrastructure specialist.

The accused are implicated in forging signatures for temporary shelter construction contracts, allowing them to list non-existent workers and inflate costs. They then allegedly pocketed the surplus. They also stand accused of handing out contracts to friends and receiving kickbacks. It is further reported that the DSWD staff are selling relief supplies to typhoon victims, instead of distributing them freely.

While this corruption may have enabled sections of the state bureaucracy to profit from the misery of the typhoon victims, this is not the primary cause of their suffering. The aid supplied has been minuscule and the failure to distribute it, politically motivated.

In the week that followed the seizure of the DSWD office, the typhoon victims returning to the Compostela Valley from Davao were repeatedly harassed and threatened by the army. On March 4, Christina Morales Jose, a leader of Barug Katawhan, was returning to Davao to report these human rights abuses, when she was shot dead by an unidentified assailant on a motorcycle.

Thousands of the inhabitants of the Compostela Valley are still hungry. The rice they have been promised is sitting in warehouses under the protection of government security forces. As for Bayan, with shameless opportunism, it has used the hunger and desperation of thousands of people as a cheap platform for its own political publicity.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact