

Over 150 dead in earthquake in the central Philippines

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A 7.2 magnitude earthquake hit the central Philippines on Tuesday. The island of Bohol, epicenter of the earthquake, was worst affected, and 149 people have officially been reported as killed, 188 injured and 21 missing. In the surrounding islands of Cebu, Siquijor and Negros, an additional 12 people have been reported dead and 186 injured.

Over three million people in seven cities were affected by the quake and more than 158,000 persons have been displaced from their homes in 38 towns. An estimated 20,000 families have been relocated to government designated evacuation centers. At least 19,000 houses have been either completely destroyed or partially damaged.

The casualty count is expected to increase in the coming days as many areas of Bohol remain isolated as of this writing.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHILVOLCS) reported the earthquake struck at 8:12 in the morning of October 15, just two kilometers southeast of the town of Carmen, on the island of Bohol.

The damage across Bohol included three collapsed bridges. Five roads, and another 18 bridges, were made impassable by extensive damage. The central government admitted that as of Friday more than 25 percent of the island remained without electric power. With available fuel supplies expected to last just eight more days, and rice supplies for 30, the damage to roads and other infrastructure will hinder distribution to areas in dire need.

Two towns, Maribojoc and Loon, were reported to be completely cut off. In Loon, the food supply was estimated to be adequate for only one more day before it runs out.

Loon, a town of over 40,000 people, appears to be the

worst hit on Bohol, with 42 people dead. News websites showed heartrending scenes of residents desperately searching for family members in the rubble despite continuing aftershocks.

In an Agence France Presse report, a Loon farmer spoke of digging with his hands through the debris of his home to retrieve his mother-in-law and cousin. "They were alive, but they died of their injuries three hours later. There was no rescue that came, we had to rely on neighbors for help," Serafin Megallen stated.

The town hospital, according to an ABS-CBN News report, was totally destroyed. Two people are believed trapped beneath the rubble. The hospital's 92 patients have been moved to makeshift beds in the open. There is only one doctor in attendance.

Also hit by the quake was the nearby island of Cebu where a building in a fishing port collapsed, killing five people and injuring seven. A stampede in a local gym, where the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) was distributing small cash grants, killed five people, including a four-year-old child, and injured a further sixteen people.

Three hospitals have been declared "unfit for occupancy." The closing of the publicly-owned 300-bed Cebu City Medical Center, one of only two government-owned hospitals in the country's second largest city with a population of over 800,000, will have a punishing impact on the working masses. The hospital's current 107 patients have been moved to privately-owned hospitals following a public appeal from city officials. The private hospitals, however, reportedly refused to waive their fees and accepted the charity patients only after the city promised to issue a letter of intent to pay. During the transfer of the patients, one patient reportedly died.

According to the Heritage Conservation Society, 10

historically significant churches have been also been damaged in the Bohol and Cebu Islands. The Church of San Pedro Apostol in the Loboc town built in 1602 by the Jesuits suffered major infrastructure damage with its intricate front façade having collapsed and a bell tower reduced to a stump. In Cebu city, the Basilica Minore del Santo Niño, the oldest church in the country built by the Spanish colonizers in 1562, also suffered major damage. These churches were some of the limited remaining examples of an architectural style developed in the early Spanish Philippines. The stone constructions, characterized by extended buttresses and a squat bell-tower, are known as “earthquake baroque.”

The government of President Benigno Aquino III responded to the major disaster that is engulfing millions in a thoroughly cynical fashion. Aquino flew over Bohol to conduct an aerial inspection and landed briefly in the island’s capital of Tagbilaran where he berated government officials and news media for issuing “panicky statements.”

Aquino’s scolding followed a report from a trade department official who described the eight-day supply of fuel in the island as critical. Aquino insisted that the supply was more than enough.

Energy department officials said emergency generators for hospitals and other critical public services, including communication, had not yet been distributed to eight towns in Bohol that remained without electrical power. Fuel supplies for the generator sets, however, were far from certain as the government was still negotiating with the oil corporations. In addition, 14 of the 46 gas stations in the island were closed.

Underscoring Aquino’s real priorities, immediately after his half-day visit to Bohol, Aquino flew to Seoul, South Korea where he signed a memorandum of agreement expanding defense cooperation between the countries. Following the election of Aquino, Manila has emerged as a spearhead of the US pivot in Asia and, with the full backing of Washington, moved to integrate itself into alliances with Tokyo, Seoul and Canberra against Beijing.

Talking to reporters in South Korea, Aquino thanked President Park Geun-hye for the transfer of a combat jet and the upcoming sale, under a combined grant and loan from Seoul, of additional military equipment, including ships, helicopters and rubber boats. “These

will give a significant boost to the continuing modernization of the armed forces of the Philippines,” Aquino stated, according to a *Philippine Daily Inquirer* report.

In another pointed reference to the Philippines’ ongoing saber-rattling against China, the new agreement is designed, according to Philippine defense officials, to augment the “country’s defense capabilities including the protection of its territory.”

The Bohol earthquake is a major natural disaster. Its terrible impact, however, is the direct result of the ongoing social devastation inflicted by capitalism on the working masses in the central Philippines.

Bohol island has the second highest incidence of poverty in the region with 32.5 percent of the population in deep poverty. More than 17 percent of the labor force is unemployed. More than half of all households do not have access to sanitary toilets. Over 10 percent of homes are using non-potable water.



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