

Record typhoon Haiyan hits central Philippines

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Super Typhoon Haiyan, known in the Philippines by its local name Yolanda, hit the central Philippines with sustained wind speeds of 195 miles per hour and gusts of up to 235 mph. When it hit the shores of the eastern Philippine island of Samar at 4:40 am local time on Friday November 8, it was “the strongest tropical cyclone on record to make landfall in world history,” according to meteorologist Jeff Masters of the *Weather Underground*.

“There aren’t too many buildings constructed that can withstand that kind of wind,” he added. “There are very few storms that have stayed at category 5 strength [the highest level] for so long.”

The typhoon ran through the Visayan islands in the central Philippines: Samar, Leyte, Bohol, Cebu, Negros, and Panay. Approximately 1 million people were forced to evacuate their homes, and the Visayas region’s entire population of over 20 million was affected. The World Food Program expects that at least 2.5 million people will need food supplies.

Both power and communications have been knocked out in most of the region, so damage and casualty reports are still preliminary. Three people have been confirmed dead not during the storm itself but in the earlier process of evacuation, two of them dying by electrocution from a downed power line.

The death toll is likely to rise dramatically, however, as communications are slowly restored throughout the region and the full scope of the devastation becomes known. When the somewhat weaker Typhoon Bopha (Pablo) hit the Southern Philippine island of Mindanao in December 2012, over 1,100 people were killed.

As this article went to publication, Captain John Andrews, deputy director general of the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines, reported that over 100 dead bodies were “lying in the streets” in the city of

Tacloban on the island of Leyte. Many more deaths seem certain to be reported.

Mathias Eick of the European commission’s humanitarian aid department in Manila explained, “In our previous experience with similar storms, because the Philippines are comprised of many islands and many isolated communities, often the statistics show a very low human toll at first, but then within 24 or 48 hours the numbers just take off ... With many isolated communities on smaller islands or living in mountainous areas, it takes some time for the authorities, Red Cross, and volunteers to collate the information.”

The widespread devastation and death wreaked on the Philippines by storms like Bopha and Haiyan are rooted in social conditions of extreme poverty and inequality. The two leading causes of death from typhoon are massive flooding and mudslides.

The flooding that can suddenly drown entire villages and the poorer sections of cities is the direct result of the decrepit, impoverished urban infrastructure and drainage system. The horrific death tolls from mudslides are the result of masses of people being compelled by poverty to eke out a precarious existence on the deforested sides of mountains, or at the base of towering urban landfills.

It is hoped that the extraordinary velocity of Haiyan, which caused massive wind damage across the central Philippines, may limit the number of deaths. The storm traveled very rapidly across the region, limiting overall rainfall in any given location. This would mean fewer mudslides and flash floods as a result of the storm.

What video footage is currently available reveals massive devastation: roofs lifted off houses and public markets, storm surges at the coastline, and toppled trees and power lines.

The *Weather Underground* stated that given landfall speeds of Haiyan, the southern coast of Samar would have sustained “perhaps the greatest wind damage any place on Earth has endured from a tropical cyclone in the past century.”

In a statement, President Benigno Aquino said that the low death toll was the result of the advanced preparedness of his administration. In fact, the “preparedness” Aquino was referring to was limited to this: a day before the storm, he went on national television and advised those in the direct path of the storm to evacuate.

Approximately one million people were relocated to makeshift evacuation shelters—schools, gymnasiums, and churches.

Over 41 villages in the region have been officially listed by the government *Mines and Geosciences Bureau* as at high or very high risk of mudslide. This fact has been known for years, yet nothing has been done to deal with this problem.

The Philippine coast guard deployed six new rubber boats to the central Philippines, although it is uncertain if they arrived in time for the storm, as they were kept in Manila until Wednesday so that they could receive a ceremonial blessing from the Catholic Church.

Tens of thousands of people on the island of Bohol were forced to evacuate from the tents where the government has been housing them since the 7.2 magnitude earthquake on October 15 forced them to evacuate their homes. It is still unclear where they went after being evacuated.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) stated that they had “prepositioned 27,550 family food packs in Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, Quezon), Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan), Bicol, Western, Central and Eastern Visayas, Northern Mindanao, and Caraga region.”

Most of these locations are out of Haiyan’s immediate path. What food packs have been supplied, however, risk being completely inadequate to feed the 1 million evacuees.

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