

Military curfew imposed as humanitarian crisis engulfs Philippines

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12 November 2013

A humanitarian crisis of catastrophic proportions is taking shape in the Philippines in the wake of super-typhoon Haiyan, known in the Philippines by its local name Yolanda.

Though the current official count of confirmed dead issued by the Philippine government is only 1,774, it is expected that the death toll will be far larger. The estimated figure of at least 10,000 dead in the city of Tacloban alone has not been revised. One million Filipinos are in makeshift evacuation centers.

Large sections of the central Philippines, portions of the islands of Samar, Leyte, Panay and Cebu remain completely isolated. No aid has been delivered to these locations and no count of the dead or damage assessment has been conducted. Officials have stated that it will be months before electric power is restored to the region.

At sundown in Tacloban on Monday evening, over 100,000 people were without shelter, medical care, or basic food or fresh water. Corpses still litter the streets.

Philippine Interior Minister Mar Roxas said that some relief supplies were beginning to arrive at the Tacloban airport, but added, “they could go no farther because debris was blocking the roads in the area.” City residents in the tens of thousands have trudged the eight kilometers from the city center to the airport in an attempt to receive a day’s allotment of food or water. Photos reveal queues stretching out of sight of people looking to receive aid.

Resident Joan Lumbré Wilson described to AFP the daily struggle to walk to the airport for supplies: “We want water and medicines for the injured... They’re trying to drive us away again, back to our places, where it’s too far, and then do it again tomorrow [walk to reach the compound], and it’s not fair on us ... We’re already tired, emotionally drained, physically exhausted.”€

As desperation mounts, residents have attempted to locate medicine, food, water and infant formula by breaking into locked grocery stores and malls.

High school teacher Andrew Pameda told an interviewer, “Tacloban is totally destroyed. Some people are losing their minds from hunger or from losing their families ... People are becoming violent. They are looting business establishments, the malls, just to find food, rice and milk.... I am afraid that in one week, people will be killing from hunger.”“

These attempts to gain basic necessities has been decried by businessmen and by the local government, who have called for the imposition of “law and order” and martial law.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino has declared a state of national calamity and a regional state of emergency, both of which grant him extraordinary executive powers. He has used these powers to enact a state of *de facto* martial law.

A curfew has been imposed on all residents of Tacloban. From 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., no one is to be in the streets. Several interviewed residents stated that the curfew was being imposed beginning at 8 p.m., and not at 10 p.m.

It is not clear how residents will stay off the streets in Tacloban, a city where at least 90 percent of homes have been utterly devastated. Aerial photos of poorer neighborhoods in Tacloban resemble photographs taken after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima: nothing stands.

The state of emergency is being enforced by 883 heavily-armed police and 500 military personnel, 169 of whom are Special Forces. These troops were brought to the devastated city in the C-130 cargo planes that should have been used to carry desperately needed supplies.

They patrol the city in armed convoys, which Aquino described as a “show of force.” Philippine National Police chief General Alan Purisima said they “will flood Tacloban with policemen to restore law and order... We assure the people that the government will have full

control. The policemen we deployed there should make their presence felt.”

Even in daylight, survivors are routinely stopped, questioned, and frisked on the streets and at military checkpoints throughout the city.

Davao City Mayor Rodrigo Duterte, a key ally of the Philippine Maoists, ordered security personnel accompanying trucks and ambulances going to Samar and Leyte to shoot anyone attempting to take relief goods or medicine. He said, “If these people will not listen to your request for them not to touch your group, I order you to shoot anyone who will persist in getting anything from you.”

Aquino has taken over from Tacloban Mayor Alfred Romualdez, a nephew of political rival Imelda Marcos, declaring Interior Secretary Mar Roxas a “disaster czar” in charge of local government functions.

Philippine Red Cross head and political personality Richard Gordon admitted to the press that the Red Cross deliberately “slowed the delivery of relief goods” due to the ongoing “looting.” His agency had already ordered 10,000 body bags, but he stated “we do not know how many people have been washed out to sea.”

He also admitted that relief workers had not reached any other towns.

There are very rough damage estimates from portions of the coasts of Samar and Leyte. The town of Guian, population 50,000, is reportedly utterly destroyed. Over 500 people have been buried in a mass grave in the town of Basey. Given the grossly disproportionate ratio of official deaths reported to the estimated fatality count in Tacloban alone, there is strong reason to suspect that the death toll will again skyrocket when contact with these regions is established.

Further, all homes and crops up and down the eastern coasts have been destroyed. It must be feared that survivors in these regions, out of touch with relief workers, are facing desperate conditions, including potential starvation.

The Department of Agriculture published an initial estimate of the crop damage resulting from Haiyan, calculating that P3.7 billion (\$US84.9 million) worth of crops were destroyed as of November 10. It stated, “Rice, which is now being harvested, sustained the worst damage, followed by fisheries and irrigation. Other commodities affected were corn, livestock and high-value crops.”

Even before the vultures of international finance capital have begun to circle, others are looking for ways to profit.

Wu Mingze, market specialist at OANDA Asia Pacific, a foreign exchange trading firm, stated: “We know that the rebuilding effort is going to cost money, but this cost is going to be beneficial when we talk about the cycle of spending. It’s going to build up the economy even further.”€

In the face of this devastation, Washington has committed only \$100,000 in cash aid and, instead of greater cash aid, a convoy of 90 marines. Amid ongoing negotiations about the permanent basing of US forces in the country as part of US imperialism’s drive to encircle China, Washington is eager to exploit every opportunity to place troops on the ground to strengthen its negotiating position.

The devastation wrought by Haiyan is being universally depicted as the tragic, but inevitable outcome of the unprecedented fury of nature. This is a political lie disguised as fatalism.

The Philippines is a country in a precarious geographical position. It is at high risk of volcanoes, earthquakes, typhoons, and tsunamis. These natural catastrophes happen with a nearly predictable regularity, and humanity has the technological capacity to monitor and prepare for these events and the social resources to dramatically limit their impact.

The dead and the deprived in the wake of Haiyan are the victims not of a typhoon, but of a perfect storm of social inequality. The homes destroyed were built of the materials of poverty, woefully inadequate to the task of weathering any such event. The well-built homes and businesses of the wealthy still stand.

At risk communities should have had well stocked and sturdy evacuation centers at a safe remove from the coast. No such preparations were made.

As survivors desperately fend for themselves, they are flung up not against an unfeeling natural catastrophe, but against the armed might of a state determined to enforce the conditions of glaring social inequality.



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