

# A pittance in international aid for Philippine typhoon victims

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In the wake of super-typhoon Haiyan, which tore a path of destruction through the central Philippines last Friday, the UN has launched an appeal for \$301 million to provide relief and assistance for those whose lives have been devastated. The fund, which is currently nowhere near its target, is woefully inadequate for the pressing needs at hand.

The UN itself estimates that 11 million people have been affected by Haiyan; meaning the fund will provide an average of less than \$30 person. According to the Philippine government, more than 2 million people need immediate food aid and at least 670,000 people have been displaced. The disaster's full scale is still emerging as many areas have been cut off due to blocked roads, damaged airports and lack of communications. The UN has released just \$25 million in emergency relief funds.

Photos and reports from the worst affected areas reveal scenes of utter devastation. As in the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami, entire cities and towns have been levelled, leaving survivors without the rudiments of survival—water, food and shelter. “Water supply and power are cut. Much of the food stocks and other goods are destroyed. Many health facilities are not functioning and medical supplies [are] quickly being exhausted,” the UN emergency relief agency stated.

As of yesterday, dead bodies were still being removed from the streets of Tacloban, the main city on the island of Leyte. Thousands of survivors flocked to the airport outside town, desperate for food and water and to leave on the military planes ferrying in relief supplies. On President Benigno Aquino's orders, the aircraft also brought in soldiers armed with automatic weapons to suppress growing anger and protect businesses from people facing starvation.

The worst affected are the working class and the

urban and rural poor, whose flimsy homes and possessions were swept away by ferocious winds and storm surges. Outside the major cities, survivors in towns and villages have been left to fend for themselves.

The *Guardian* reported that in northern Cebu “in village after village, families line the road requesting help.” Dondon Toleng told the newspaper that some aid was arriving, but his family had to travel 20 kilometres to nearby Bogo City to get it. Profiteers are exploiting the lack of aid. “We have no fuel, we have no money, our water pumps are broken, so everything costs,” Toleng said. He explained that water cost 30 pesos, but he only earned 60 pesos a day as a sugar cane cutter.

The official death toll was 1,798 as of yesterday evening, but the actual figure is likely to be far higher. Aquino yesterday dismissed estimates by local officials that the number of dead in Tacloban alone could be as high as 10,000, saying they were “too close” to the centre of destruction. Aquino, who confronts mounting public anger over the lack of preparation and the inadequacy of the relief effort, said the final total would be about 2,500.

In the Philippines and around the world, ordinary working people have donated generously to relief appeals. Volunteers, local and international, have given up their time to assist in providing aid. In stark contrast, the major powers have offered a pittance in aid and, in the case of the US and Britain, dispatched warships to the disaster zone.

The US has upped its initial donation of just \$100,000 to \$20 million. Japan has offered \$10 million, Australia \$9.6 million, Britain \$16 million, the European Union \$4 million and Germany \$670,000. The total, even if delivered in full, falls far short of the very modest UN target of \$301 million.

Behind the ritual expressions of concern from US President Obama and other world leaders, more cynical calculations are being made. The provision of aid is completely bound up with gaining geo-political advantage at the expense of rivals. In particular, the Obama administration's decision to dispatch the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, and four other warships to the Philippines is designed to garner support in the region for the US "pivot to Asia" and its preparations for war against China.

With US backing, the Aquino administration has played an especially provocative role in pressing its territorial claims in the South China Sea against China. As part of its military build-up throughout the region, the US is seeking new basing arrangements in the Philippines. The presence of the USS George Washington, with its contingent of 5,000 sailors and more than 80 warplanes, establishes a significant precedent, provides a political boost for Aquino and further cements ties with the military in the former American colony.

The US has exploited the major disasters in Asia over the past decade in a similar fashion. Following the horrific Asian tsunami in 2004, which left at least 230,000 dead in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and Thailand, the Pentagon sent navy ships to Sri Lanka and Indonesia, putting US boots on the ground for the first time in each country, and forging closer ties with both militaries. In Sri Lanka, top US officials used the opportunity to size up the country's long-running civil war, quietly offer aid to the Sri Lankan military in advance of the re-emergence of open conflict in 2006, and visit the coveted deep water harbour of Trincomalee. (See "The tsunami in Sri Lanka: A case study in US humanitarian missions")

When a massive cyclone devastated Burma in 2008, the US, Britain and France stationed warships off the coast and utilised the catastrophe to pressure the country's military junta to open up to foreign military forces and "unimpeded access." The campaign was part of the ongoing efforts to lever Burma away from its close ties with China and open it up to Western investment, as has emerged since 2011.

The purpose of the US military's "humanitarian mission" to the Philippines was candidly discussed in a *USA Today* comment by Rand Corporation analyst

Jonah Blank. The Rand Corporation has longstanding and close ties with the American military and intelligence establishment.

Blank declared: "Deploying military resources for disaster relief is a remarkably effective—and inexpensive—investment in the future. One of the largest such deployments in history, the deployment of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other assets following the Asian tsunami of 2004, is estimated to have cost \$857 million. That's roughly the price of three days' operations in Afghanistan last year."

The benefits for the US were "incalculable," Blank wrote. "Nearly a decade later, the effort may rank as one of the most concrete reasons Southeast Asian nations trust the long-term U.S. commitment to a strategy of 'Asian rebalancing' ["pivot to Asia]."

Praising the Obama administration's decision to send the USS George Washington to the Philippines, he concluded: "As the Pentagon attempts to shift more of its weight to the Asian Pacific region while balancing a shrinking budget, this could turn out to be one of the best decisions it could make."



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