

Millions face desperate plight in Philippines

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14 November 2013

Nearly a week after Super Typhoon Haiyan—known locally as Typhoon Yolanda—smashed into the Philippines’ central islands last Friday, millions of predominantly poor people are still confronting devastation and destitution.

Even as the Philippine government declared that it had responded to the disaster “quite well,” shocking scenes were emerging of bodies left strewn across towns, desperate people killed while trying to grab bags of rice from a government warehouse, children begging on streets for food and water, and families living in makeshift huts.

The typhoon, which flattened entire towns, whipped up tsunami-like waves and knocked out roads, electricity and water supplies, is the Philippines’ worst disaster triggered by a typhoon or earthquake. With many remote areas still not accounted for, the death toll is almost certain to exceed the 5,791 people who perished in the 1976 quake and tsunami in the Moro Gulf.

President Benigno Aquino’s government, which is now downplaying the scale of the destruction, claims that the fatalities will fall well short of initial estimates of 10,000 deaths and puts the number of people affected at just over 8 million. But the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs says 11.3 million people are in need, lacking food, healthcare and access to education and livelihoods.

Eight people were crushed to death after typhoon survivors stormed a National Food Authority (NFA) rice warehouse in Alangalang, near the devastated city of Tacloban. Police and soldiers guarding the facility were overpowered by the crowd, who carted off more than 100,000 bags of rice, according to a spokesman for the NFA, the government’s rice trading agency. “One wall of our warehouses collapsed and eight people were crushed and killed instantly,” he told reporters.

From Tacloban, the capital of Leyte province, which

bore the brunt of the typhoon, Australian Broadcasting Corporation correspondent Stephen McDonnell reported: “Emergency accommodation is nowhere to be seen and even the basics like food and medicine are still out of the reach of many.” This was despite the military, ordered in by Aquino, bringing the city “by and large under control.” McDonnell added: “And then there are all these communities beyond Tacloban. People are walking into Tacloban from much more isolated, devastated areas, hoping for some help. What they’re finding is the remnants of the city that used to be there.”

Reports filtering in from remote areas indicate greater destruction. In Guiuan, on the easternmost coast of the Philippines, where the typhoon first struck, the mayor, Sheen Gonzales, told the *Guardian*: “We are 100 percent wiped out by Yolanda. It was like the end of the world.” Residents were living in flimsy shelters made from tarpaulins or corrugated iron blown off buildings.

Mark Biong, the mayor of another town, Giporlos, was waiting at the Guiuan airstrip in the hope of getting supplies. So far he had been given just 480 family packs for 6,000 affected households. “I can’t deliver that,” he said. “It will just create chaos if I bring that little food for my town. People will get angry about it.”

Guiuan resident Flora Paraskovich denounced the authorities. “How many typhoons have already hit the Philippines for you to learn what has to be done?... When another typhoon comes it will still be the same. Our next house will be made of concrete. But most families cannot afford to build those kinds of homes.”

The Aquino administration’s response combines callous indifference with political coverup and preoccupation with corporate interests. Cabinet Secretary Rene Almendras said the government had performed “quite well,” while the Department of Tourism urged people to visit, saying the country was a “safe and fun” destination, including in typhoon-hit

regions. Finance Secretary Cesar Purisima told an investment summit in Manila that the country had the fiscal ability to deal with the relief and rebuilding costs, because the government had cut the budget deficit to within 2 percent of gross domestic product.

Increasingly nakedly, for all their professions of humanitarian concern, the responses of the major global powers are determined by geo-political and military calculations, bound up with the US “pivot” to Asia to counter China’s rising influence. Aquino’s administration has functioned as one of Washington’s closest allies in this aggressive drive, escalating territorial disputes with Beijing in the South China Sea and moving to grant the US military basing rights in the Philippines.

“US military footprint on Philippines could grow after typhoon Haiyan,” the *Christian Science Monitor* reported yesterday, highlighting the arrival of 2,000 US marines and the dispatch of a naval battle group led by the giant aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington. “The aftermath of typhoon Haiyan is showing Filipinos the benefits of a robust US military presence,” the newspaper commented. “That could help a US-Philippines military accord currently under discussion.”

David Arase, a professor of international politics at the Johns Hopkins University-Nanjing University Center in China, told the newspaper: “Once the George Washington arrives and starts dispensing life-saving potable water, it’s going to be a huge photo op that reminds everybody in the region that the US is not just a traditional security ally, but a partner in nontraditional security crises as well.”

Likewise, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s government in Japan, which the Obama administration has encouraged to re-militarise in order to counteract China, said it would send as many as 1,000 Self-Defense Forces (SDF) troops to the Philippines. The deployment will feature three warships, transport aircraft and helicopters, making it the biggest-ever SDF “relief mission” overseas.

Abe has strengthened military ties with Manila this year, including by supplying coast guard vessels. About 1,000 Japanese military personnel were sent to Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, and troops went to Haiti following its 2010 earthquake.

A debate has evidently broken out within the Chinese leadership, which has been derided in the Western

media for donating just \$100,000 to the typhoon relief operation, compared to its promise of \$4.88 million to Pakistan’s earthquake disaster two months ago.

In an editorial, the state-controlled *Global Times* called for China not to be left behind in the Philippines emergency, despite Beijing’s territorial dispute with Manila: “China, as a responsible power, should participate in relief operations to assist a disaster-stricken neighboring country, no matter whether it’s friendly or not. China’s international image is of vital importance to its interests. If it snubs Manila this time, China will suffer great losses.”

In Australia, Rory Medcalf, director of the international security program at the Lowy Institute, a corporate thinktank, said the US military effort would be valuable for both Washington and Canberra at a time “when American power and purpose in Asia are being questioned” in the wake of President Obama’s inability to attend key Asia-Pacific summits because of the recent US government shutdown.

Medcalf said the US naval and Marine contingent would be “a reminder that the forward-deployed American military is still the first and fastest responder to contingencies of any kind.”



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