

Mounting anger at Philippine president's response to typhoon disaster

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Amid reports of hunger and destitution across the central islands of the Philippines, there is growing popular anger over President Benigno Aquino's response to the devastation caused by Super Typhoon Yolanda (known internationally as Haiyan). The inadequacy and slowness of the official international response has also become obvious.

Millions of displaced people remain desperately short of food, water, housing and other basic necessities, with some turning to looting to survive. Hospitals lack supplies, leading to fears of disease outbreaks. Distraught families appear regularly on TV news programs, some holding signs reading "Help us" or "We need food."

"The government has abandoned us to survive on our own ... that is why we are angry," 67-year-old grandmother Dayday Serdena told France24. Another survivor told reporters: "We haven't received anything, not even a drop of porridge... Are they going to wait for all of us here to get sick and die, one by one, before they do anything?"

In a bid to stem the discontent, Aquino said he would visit Tacloban City, one of the worst-hit locations, today "to show our kababayan (countrymen) that we have not abandoned them, to ease their tension and end their desperation." Even as he announced the visit from the presidential palace, however, he continued to blame local governments for the scale of the tragedy, accusing them of "giving up" and burdening the national government with unexpected responsibilities.

The government is still attempting to cover up the scale of the human suffering. In an interview with CNN, Aquino ridiculed initial estimates of 10,000 deaths, saying that figure reflected the "emotional trauma" of local officials. He claimed that the toll would more likely be around 2,500. By yesterday,

however, the government raised its count to 3,621—still at odds with the UN's latest estimate of 4,460—with many outlying areas yet to be included. Tacloban town hall officials said the number in that city alone had reached 4,000.

Yesterday, the government's national disaster council declared that it would take sole control over the release of casualty figures. The regional police chief who made the 10,000 estimate was suspended to undertake "stress debriefing." One reason for the suppression of information is that two days before the typhoon struck, Aquino grandiosely set a target of "zero casualties"—which only served to disarm local people in the face of the impending onslaught.

A damning feature of the official response is the slow delivery of aid. During the first six days, the government distributed only 50,000 "food packs" containing 6 kg of rice and canned goods each day, covering just 3 percent of the 1.73 million families affected, according to government figures.

Misleading claims are repeatedly made that relief is arriving in devastated areas. For example, on Wednesday, presidential spokesperson Edwin Lacierda said supplies were getting into Tacloban. But a reporter from the Associated Press who drove around the city that day reported there was "no evidence of any organised delivery of food, water or medical supplies, though piles of aid have begun to arrive at the airport."

Popular outrage has intensified because local populations and authorities are being blamed for the problems. Asked if the quality and speed with which the Aquino administration was responding to the humanitarian emergency would define the presidency, Cabinet Secretary Rene Almendras said: "I don't think it is an acid test of this administration. This is an acid test of Filipino people... It's not within the national

government's control, how effectively we can hit the ground."

There was a torrent of criticism of Aquino as a "brat" and "diva" for walking out of a disaster briefing in Tacloban City last Sunday. Aquino was evidently frustrated by reports about the damage and deaths. "If he can't take this, maybe he should also walk out of Palace seat," one social media blogger suggested.

Aquino and Interior Secretary Mar Roxas responded by denouncing media reports of a slow official response as "ridiculous" and trying to bully news organisations into backing the government's line. "Use your role to uplift the spirits of the Filipino people—to find stories of resilience, hope and faith, and show the world just how strong the Filipino people are," the president said.

Earlier in the week, Aquino claimed that once the immediate needs of survivors were met, his focus would turn to rebuilding the thousands of homes affected, this time to standards better able to withstand typhoons. He made similar empty pledges after every major disaster during his three years in office, including Typhoon Pablo, which hit Mindanao last year and killed more than 1,000 people. In reality, the worst-affected victims of these catastrophes are invariably among the millions of poor people living in shanties, who have no way of paying for safe accommodation.

These social conditions, combined with the glaring gulf between the wealthy and the working class in the Philippines, as in the rest of the world, are the underlying source of the deepening hostility toward Aquino's administration. The country's grinding poverty has continued, but the national corporate elite and global corporations have benefited enormously from his pro-market policies.

Since Aquino took office in 2010, the benchmark stock index has surged nearly 90 percent and foreign direct investment has more than doubled. In recent months, his opinion poll ratings plummeted as his claims of fighting corruption were exposed by revelations that some lawmakers, including his allies, were stealing up to half the money being allocated to local projects from discretionary government funds. (See: "Philippine Senate holds hearing on corruption scandal")

Thursday's arrival of the aircraft carrier, the USS George Washington, heading a fleet of seven warships, was generally heralded in the Philippine and Western

media as a turning point in the international relief effort, with US helicopters bringing aid to remote areas for the first time.

Given the crisis engulfing the Aquino government, the US military's arrival is more of a show of force designed to bolster his administration, which has become a spearhead of the Obama administration's diplomatic and military "pivot" to Asia to counter the rising influence of China. Since President Obama's inability to visit the Philippines and attend key Asian summits last month, because of the government shutdown in Washington, there have also been vocal concerns within the local ruling elite over the wisdom of Aquino's role in escalating territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Under the cover of a "humanitarian" intervention, the George Washington task force will conduct extensive operations throughout the central Philippine islands, marking a return of US troops and military assets on a scale not seen since the closure of the giant Subic Bay naval base and Clark air base in 1991-92. The senior US commander in the Philippines, Marine Brigadier General Paul Kennedy, told the BBC that the US aid effort was being stepped up to a level that has "probably never been applied" before.

As if to symbolise the return, the George Washington is moored just off the eastern coast of Samar island, near where US General Douglas MacArthur's force of 174,000 troops landed in October 1944 to retake the Philippines from Japanese control during World War II.

Seven decades later, the return of the US military to the former American colony this week is also aimed at helping to consolidate American dominance throughout the Indo-Pacific region.



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