

Philippine typhoon survivors stage protests

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Thousands of survivors from the Typhoon Haiyan calamity mounted a demonstration in Tacloban city in Leyte island on January 25. The *Freeman* newspaper reported that participants protested against President Benigno Aquino's handling of the relief and rehabilitation operations. They cited corruption in the construction of temporary shelters, the prioritized distribution of relief goods to Aquino supporters and lack of government financial assistance three months after the typhoon devastated the central Philippines on November 8. More than 6,000 people were killed by the typhoon.

Protest organizers said that over 12,000 survivors from Tacloban and Ormoc cities, and towns in Samar island attended the demonstration. A statement released by People Surge demanded 40,000 pesos (less than \$US900) in immediate financial assistance for every afflicted family. It also called for the scrapping of the policy preventing the urban poor and fishermen rebuilding their homes within 40 meters of the coastline along the eastern seaboard of Leyte and Samar, and the immediate reconstruction of public schools and hospitals and the restoration of electricity and water.

Earlier in January, Typhoon Haiyan survivors in Panay island demonstrated in the cities of Iloilo and Roxas. All these protests have been organized by various Maoist parties and front organizations, which are deeply integrated into the Philippine political establishment, as a means of defusing the mounting anger and hostility among workers and the poor in the typhoon areas over the lack of government assistance.

According to the government itself, the typhoon struck some of the poorest regions in the Philippines where the average household income was only 75 percent of the national average. The poverty rate ranged from 25 percent in Panay island to as high as 63.7 percent in Eastern Samar, one of the hardest hit provinces in Samar island. Pre-typhoon data also

showed that affected areas had high rates of malnutrition, with a majority of households without access to safe water and sanitary toilet facilities. Leyte and Samar islands had the second highest rate of child mortality.

The Asian Development Bank estimated that the poverty incidence would increase by 1.9 percent in 2014 because of the typhoon; an increase equivalent to almost 2 million people.

The category 5 typhoon compounded the already catastrophic social conditions in the islands. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), an estimated 5.6 million workers lost their jobs either permanently or temporarily in the wake of the typhoon.

“At least 2.4 million affected workers were already in a vulnerable situation before the typhoon struck, often living at or near the poverty line, doing whatever work they could find to survive and provide for their families,” the ILO report added. “These people have lost the little they had to begin with,” the report added.

Over a half a million houses were totally destroyed and another half million “partially” damaged, resulting in over 4 million people being displaced. Of this number, the government admits, only about 100,000 are sheltered in official evacuation centers. Hundreds of thousands are sheltering in tent cities or under tarpaulins and in the patched-up remains of their homes.

Two weeks ago, more than a thousand people already displaced by Typhoon Haiyan fled to damaged public schools and other government buildings in the town of Guiuan, Eastern Samar, as tropical depression Agaton swept away tents and roofs from temporary shelters.

Oxfam's country director in the Philippines Justin Morgan pointed to the latest storm, saying: “People are struggling to find places that are warm and out of harm's way. More were made homeless in the Philippines by Typhoon Haiyan than by the 2004 Asian

Tsunami and with only three out of 32 evacuation centers remaining in Guiuan, this is a disaster on top of an already catastrophic disaster.”

In addition to the destruction of jobs and homes, nearly 3,200 schools and day care centers have been destroyed and another 14,508 classrooms in public schools partially damaged. More than 33 million coconut trees and, as well, the livelihoods of over 120,000 coconut farmers, were destroyed in Leyte and Samar islands.

A recent survey by the Social Weather Station is indicative. According to the survey, 72 percent of those affected by the typhoon rated themselves poor. Among those not affected, 50 percent rated themselves poor. In addition, the survey revealed that nearly 20 percent of Typhoon Haiyan survivors experienced hunger at least once a day during the final quarter of 2013.

The response of the Aquino government, and of the ruling business and financial elites, has been unsurprising: there is no money to fund the massive construction program needed to construct proper public housing, schools and hospitals, repair power transmission systems and water utilities. Nor can the stranglehold of big businesses and big landlords over the land in the affected areas be broken to provide safe permanent relocation sites for the displaced people and farms for poor peasants.

A government report estimated that reconstruction of the public infrastructure, the building of shelters and resettlement, assistance to rebuild farms and industries would cost than more 360 billion pesos, or \$US8 billion, over a four-year period.

The report also indicated that 90 billion pesos, or \$US2 billion, were needed for 2014 alone. However, the Aquino government has budgeted just 20 billion pesos for rehabilitation for this year.

To fill the gap, Aquino plans to expand public-private partnerships for major investments, facilitate bulk government purchases from the private sector, and accelerate issuance of licenses for new businesses. In other words, the government is preparing to open up much-needed reconstruction works for private profit.

Moves along this line are well underway. This month, the Aquino government announced that reconstruction of 18 out of 24 areas has been turned over to 18 conglomerates and that at least 30 billion pesos of public funds would be funnelled into funding these

projects.



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