

Six months after Typhoon Haiyan

## Woman and six children killed in fire in tent city in Philippines

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On May 25, a fire broke out in a canvas tent in Tacloban City, killing a woman and her six children. The tent functioned as a temporary refugee shelter for the family whose home and livelihood was destroyed by Typhoon Haiyan six months ago. The tragedy of the Ocenar family is emblematic of the social devastation that has been inflicted on millions of Filipinos in central Philippines in the wake of the typhoon.

The tent that housed the family burned to the ground at midnight. The woman and five of her children died on the spot. A sixth child died in a hospital several hours later, after suffering cardiac arrest. Local authorities believe the fire was caused by an overturned kerosene lamp.

Killed were Maria Eliza Ocenar, 35; Kathlyn Ocenar, 12; Justine Ocenar, 9; John Mark, 7; Jasmine Claire Ocenar, 5; Tisay Ocenar, 2; and Jacklyn Ocenar, 4 months old.

Yesterday, according to a report in the *Philippine Star*, the government ordered “concerned government agencies to investigate the fire.”

“This is one serious thing that will surely be given serious attention and action so that (the incident) won’t be repeated,” a spokesperson for President Benigno Aquino told the paper.

Despite such posturing, the tragedy and the continuing social devastation inflicted on the survivors of Typhoon Haiyan is the direct outcome of the criminal neglect and machinations of the Aquino administration and the entire political establishment and of the profit system that they defend.

In November 2013, Typhoon Haiyan, one of the strongest storms in recorded history swept through and devastated the central Philippines. The most recent

government report on the aftermath of the typhoon, released in April, indicated that over 6,200 people had been killed, four million displaced, and over half a million homes completely destroyed. Damage to infrastructure and agriculture is estimated to be 39 billion pesos (\$US890 million).

Six months on, social conditions, which were already dire in one of the poorest areas in the Philippines, have become even more desperate as hundreds of thousands of farmers, fishermen and workers have lost their sources of income with the destruction of businesses, farms and fishing boats.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN) reports that 600,000 hectares of coconut farmlands and 33 million coconut trees have been destroyed, depriving more than a million farmers of their source of income.

Fishing workers have also been badly hit as an estimated 30,000 fishing boats were reported damaged and at least 10,000 fishing boats destroyed.

In the immediate aftermath of the typhoon, an estimated 5.9 million jobs were either lost or suspended. Of these, three million were in the service sector, finding work in restaurants, schools, markets and the like. Tellingly, according to the government, only half of the public schools in the region are expected to open for the 2014 school year this June.

The Ocenar family, like many others, was driven from Samar, the eastern most island in the Philippines which was even more devastated than neighboring Leyte Island. Maria Ocenar brought her family to Tacloban, the capital of Leyte, seeking aid.

She joined 52,000 people in the city still living in temporary shelters made of plastic sheets or canvass.

She and her children lived in a tent city alongside 700 other families without adequate sanitation, water and electric facilities. Maria attempted to provide for her family by working as a *labandera*, the backbreaking work of washing people's clothing by hand squatting over a *batsya*, or basin.

Those who arrived ahead of her were given solar powered lights. As supplies had apparently run out, Maria was instead supplied with a kerosene lamp.

The Aquino government claims that over 30 billion pesos have already been released for infrastructure and rehabilitation. It estimates that over 100 billion pesos will have to be spent just to restore the region to its previous, poverty ridden state. Meanwhile only 11 billion pesos have been pledged by international institutions and donors. None of this amount will be used for building houses for the displaced.

According to the *Philippine Star*, a total of 4,853 temporary housing units and 14,433 permanent housing units are needed for Tacloban city alone. Of this number, nearly 80 percent of temporary houses and nearly half of permanent housing have not been funded. More than 3 billion pesos is needed. Those built or slated for construction are all funded by international and local donor organizations or groups. No houses will be built by the government itself.

According to a local news report, the government housing policy is for the national government to shoulder site development, the local government to obtain the land and for private donors to build the shelters. In other words, public funds will be paid to the local landlords and politically connected businesses for their services, but no money will be allocated for the actual construction of houses.

Meanwhile, more than a thousand kilometers away on the island of Palawan, the Aquino government is pouring over 300 million pesos into developing a naval base in Oyster Bay, for use, free of charge, by the US military. Oyster Bay will be part of the basing for US forces in the country agreed upon in the neo-colonial Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) signed on April 28 during President Obama's visit to the country.

Aquino, operating on behalf of Washington, is pouring hundreds of millions of pesos into building a string of bases in the western Philippines to serve as a jumping off point to the disputed waters of the South

China Sea, where the United States is pressing forward with its war drive against China.

The deaths of Maria Ocenar and her six children were a crime committed by capitalism, that values profit more than lives; and the interests of a tiny ruling elite, both internationally and locally, over those of millions of ordinary people.



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