Typhoon ravages southern Philippines

John Roberts
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Tropical storm Tembin made landfall in the southern Philippines island of Mindanao as a strengthened typhoon late last Friday, resulting in torrential rain, mudslides and the deaths of well over 300 people.

Tembin brought sustained winds of 120 kilometres per hour, with gusts of 145 kilometres per hour. The main damage came from the heavy rain.

Known in the Philippines as Vinta, the typhoon struck hardest on the island's Zamboanga Peninsula and parts of northern Mindanao, with the provinces of Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur bearing the brunt.

About 20 typhoons a year hit the Philippines. Less than a week earlier, tropical storm Urduja (international name Kai-Tak) swept through the central Philippines, leaving 47 dead and 44 missing. Often the storms miss Mindanao, but not this time.

Among the towns affected by Tembin was Marawi in Lanao del Sur. There the typhoon undermined attempts to rebuild the town after a five-month assault by the Philippines armed forces, supposedly to destroy an Islamist group. The campaign, from May until October, supported by Washington, left 1,000 dead and displaced 200,000 people.

Initially the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) assessed Tembin's impact as 164 dead, 176 missing and 118,596 families displaced. Some 97,000 people were housed in 261 evacuations shelters, with another 85,000 sheltering elsewhere.

The death toll steadily increased as more remote areas were reached. Some news reports yesterday put the figure at 340. Many of the missing are believed to be dead. The final number might not be known for some time. The Zamboanga Peninsula has been without power and communications, and whole towns are cut off by bridge collapses, mudslides and flooding.

According to NDRRMC spokesperson Mina Marasigan, the heavy rain caused landslides in the mountainous terrain that formed natural dams. As the deluge continued, these dams burst, sending torrents of water onto the villages below.

The force of the water was certainly a factor. Health worker Arturo Simbajon told Reuters that the coastal village of Anungan was almost entirely wiped out when logs, boulders and mud swept down a river and pushed everything out to sea. "Only the mosque was left standing. People were watching the rising sea levels but did not expect the water to come from behind."

Sibuco mayor Bong Edding blamed the loss of houses and the washing away of 30 residents on logging operations in mountains above the town. Five bodies had been recovered when he spoke to the media.

However, a significant factor in the deaths and injuries was the failure of the authorities to evacuate people from the most vulnerable areas.

NDRRMC spokesperson Marasigan claimed that the national government exhausted every means to alert people in the threatened areas in plenty of time. She said the organisation would now investigate the failure to implement pre-emptive evacuations.

Marasigan implied the victims were to blame. She told a Manila news conference it was difficult to move people from their homes before Christmas. "We don't want to be dragging people out of their homes before Christmas, but it's best to convince them to quietly understand the importance of why they are being evacuated."

These comments beg the question as to what government assistance was provided to those in the most endangered areas and whether adequate shelters were available.

In Vietnam, authorities evacuated 74,000 people from the most vulnerable areas, before the typhoon was downgraded to a tropical depression. Authorities in 15 provinces and cities were prepared to move one million people had the storm hit the tip of the Mekong Delta as

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initially predicted.

Marasigan announced a pittance in compensation. Each family that lost a loved one would receive 10,000 pesos ($US200) from the government while those with injured members would get 5,000 pesos. Those with totally damaged houses would be entitled to get 30,000 pesos, while those with partially damaged homes would receive 10,000 pesos for emergency shelter assistance.

The indifference of the Philippines authorities can be seen by the government's decision in January 2017 to shut down the National Operational Assessment of Hazard (NOAH) project due to lack of funds. Set up in 2012, the NOAH project was to be the country's main service for mapping and measuring threats to vulnerable areas.

NOAH brought together scientists in every field related to natural disasters. The program included establishing a six-hour warning to agencies involved in disaster prevention and mitigation.

From 2012 to 2017, the project was managed by the Department of Science and Technology but this year was downgraded and passed to the University of the Philippines. University officials offered to assist authorities before the present crisis but NDRRMC spokeswoman Marasigan said she was unaware of the offer.

Mahar Lagmay, head of University of the Philippines NOAH Centre, told the *Philippine Star* that many lives could have been saved had the government used existing weather forecasting technology and data that can project scenarios in particular areas hours in advance.

"When we were part of the NDRRMC, this is what we used to do," Lagmay said. "We interpret data from sensors and satellites and provide hazard-specific, area-focus and time-bound information that can be passed on to local government units."

The impact of so-called natural disasters is made worse by the failure of governments to make proper preparations, provide adequate warnings and assistance to those affected.

Millions of impoverished workers and peasants are forced to live in poorly-built housing that make them particularly exposed to flooding and typhoons. These structures are often built in low-lying areas or at the base of mountain ranges where land is cheap.

The impact of 2013 super-typhoon Haiyan, with sustained winds of 315 kilometres an hour and gusts of 380 kilometres per hour, made plain what was necessary. Solidly-built and well-provisioned evacuation centres connected to advanced warning systems, and assistance to move to the shelters, would have substantially reduced the death toll of more than 6,000 people.

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