

Magnitude 6.8 earthquake hits southern Philippines

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19 December 2019

At least nine people died after a 6.8-magnitude earthquake struck the island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines on Sunday. The quake injured more than a hundred people, caused severe damage to numerous buildings, and displaced thousands of residents in the area. It is the latest in a string of powerful tremors to hit the region over the past few months.

Striking at 5:11 p.m. local time on Sunday, the quake's epicentre, at a depth of 22.4 kilometres, was near the town of Padada in the poor rural areas of Davao del Sur province, about 90 kilometres south of the heavily populated Davao City.

One of the nine victims was a six-year-old girl who was inside her family's house in a village in Mantanao town when the building collapsed on top of her. An 81-year-old woman died from a heart attack during the quake. The other fatalities were registered in the affected towns of Magsaysay, Hagonoy and Malita.

The latest count by the National Emergency and Disaster Risk Reduction Council stated 111 people had been injured. Over 9,700 people were evacuated after Sunday's massive tremor, which destroyed 74 homes and partially destroyed 125. Damage was caused to 41 public buildings, 128 schools, and 19 health centres.

Patients were evacuated from hospitals as a precaution and nervous crowds gathered outside shopping malls after the jolt. Roads were blocked by rubble and mangled metal, while power outages soon became widespread.

Local police spokeswoman Lea Orbuda, in a comment to Agence France-Presse, spoke of the difficulties facing local authorities: "We can no longer use our office because the walls cracked and the stairs collapsed. The power is off and the water taps are dry."

On Monday two female bodies were recovered from

the rubble of a ruined municipal market in Padada town. Vice Mayor of Padada, Francisco Guerrero, told the media that rescuers at the market had deployed sensitive listening devices in order to detect any signs of life, as well as using chainsaws and thermal imaging equipment. Many are feared trapped beneath the devastated three-storey building.

Searchers were looking for a person who had texted authorities saying six people were still alive under the rubble. "It's very distressing," regional disaster official Christopher Tan told CNN Philippines. "There's a very slim chance of finding survivors."

Video footage posted by Twitter users showed a hotel swimming pool shaken violently by the tremor. Also captured was the horrifying moment when a sudden and loud electrical explosion sent people rushing out of a Davao shopping mall.

Aftershocks have continued to rattle Mindanao Island, the strongest being a magnitude 5.7 centred north of General Santos City. The state seismology bureau Phivolcs recorded 700 aftershocks, of which about 70 were noticeable, the *Philippines Daily Inquirer* reported. More aftershocks are expected to occur in the coming days and possibly weeks.

The quake was the third since late October with a magnitude of 6.5 or higher to hit the area. The series of deadly earthquakes and aftershocks has altogether cost the lives of about two dozen people and displaced nearly 20,000 Mindanao residents, forcing them into shelters.

Most of the deaths in October were due to collapsing walls and falling debris, including a teenage boy who was crushed by a crumbling wall as he tried to escape his school. Other fatalities were attributed to rock and landslides unleashed by the violent shaking that injured at least 400 people.

Senator Richard Gordon, who runs the local Red Cross operation, said first aid and trauma teams had provided assistance to several people, including a 39-year-old woman who was pinned down by a collapsed wall. Additional ambulances and medical volunteers were dispatched to affected areas to help overwhelmed local medical units.

According to the *Manila Bulletin*, Dr. Gloria Balboa from the Department of Health wrote in a situation report that medical as well as mental health and psychosocial support teams were deployed in the destroyed villages and were conducting rapid health assessments. Hygiene kits, drugs, and medicines were also distributed to regional health units.

Cabinet secretary Karlo Nograles said the national government had mobilised to assist all victims. “President Duterte is closely monitoring the progress of ongoing operations to thoroughly evaluate the damage of the quake and all ground units are ordered to work round-the-clock to make sure that everyone is safe and are ready for possible aftershocks,” Nograles said.

The president ordered all disaster relief officials and security forces be placed on a heightened state of alert and that they escalate their work in recovery operations.

Duterte, however, whose private residence is in Davao City on Mindanao, utters these routine statements not out of genuine concern for the fate of thousands of workers and farmers confronting the disaster, but out of fear of opposition to the government emerging from his own area.

In response to the quake, the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) is now fast-tracking the construction of two evacuation centres in the Caraga region of Mindanao, with the objective of providing habitable temporary shelters for residents in times of calamities.

Poorer regions of the Philippines lack natural disaster facilities, in a country hit by two dozen typhoons a year, one that sits atop the volcanic Ring of Fire, and whose cities are submerged during the monsoon months. Schools often become default evacuation sites in impoverished villages when a calamity strikes.

In 2013, the UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction published a paper outlining the lessons learned from the catastrophic Typhoon Haiyan of that year. It concluded that tests such as soil analysis had to be conducted to ensure the safety of buildings throughout the Philippine

archipelago. Furthermore, the number of hazard-adaptive evacuation centres had to be dramatically increased, while disaster programs had to be established to help the overall capacity of municipalities to respond to natural disasters.

Almost three decades have passed since the catastrophic Luzon earthquake in 1990, which toppled multi-storey buildings and killed an estimated 2,412 people. With no resources or shelters for those escaping the quake, thousands were forced to sleep on the streets.

But successive governments have failed to take these lessons into account, and little has been done to ensure new buildings are constructed to resist further calamities. Even Duterte admitted the abundance of unsafe buildings throughout Mindanao to the *Manila Times* in November.



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