

Tropical storms continue to pound the Philippines

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Still reeling from Typhoon Goni, the central Philippines was struck by Typhoon Vamco (known locally as Ulysses) this week. As of Saturday morning, local police count the death toll at 42 with at least 20 missing.

Typhoon Vamco followed a path roughly 100km north of Super Typhoon Goni, passing directly over the most populous regions including the capital, Manila, and producing the worst flooding in years. It made landfall in Patnanungan, Quezon, around 10:30 p.m. Wednesday, with sustained maximum winds of 150kph (90mph) and gusts of up to 205kph (127mph), equivalent to a category-2 hurricane.

Likely as a result of the frequency of storms over the past two months—Vamco is the 8th storm to hit since the start of October—flood waters rose quickly, catching many by surprise. A river in Marikina City, one of the most urbanised areas of the Philippines, rose one metre (three feet) in less than three hours. Residents scrambled to their roofs to avoid the rapidly rising floodwaters, which inundated around 40,000 homes in the area.

“If the flood continues to rise, then we have nowhere else to go,” one resident George Bolima said in a text exchange with the *Filipino Inquirer*. Bolima had been forced to move to the second floor of his house with his family after the first had been swallowed up in under an hour.

“We are afraid, the children are afraid. If the flood reaches us, we will have nothing left.”

Marikina City Mayor Marcelino Teodoro announced a state of calamity for the metropolis on Friday, which could only be accessed by water-craft. As well as indicating the urgency for relief efforts, the announcement allows authorities to control prices of basic goods and gives residents the ability to access

emergency loans and basic financial services.

Six rubber boats have been deployed by the government for rescue tasks and 250 Coast Guard personnel. All flights were suspended from Ninoy Aquino International Airport Thursday morning.

“It all happened so fast,” Mayor Teodoro said on Friday. “Right now, the rain is getting weaker, but water levels continue to increase in some areas.”

Strong storm surges slammed the 3,194-ton shipping container Peter Ronna against the sea wall at SM Mall of Asia in Bay City, Pasay. Another large vessel, motor tanker M/TRK Bulusan, lost control and drifted to the seaside of Ignacio Street, Navotas City.

The La Mesa dam in Quezon City was breached as of Thursday morning, increasing the danger of flooding along low-lying areas near the Tullahan River.

The water level at Marikina River reached 22 metres at 11 a.m. Thursday, a metre below the height reached under Typhoon Ondoy eleven years ago. Ulysses dumped 153mm in 24 hours, whilst Ondoy unleashed 455mm.

All 47 evacuation centres in the area were filled to capacity with 9,800 people, raising serious concerns over the spread of the coronavirus, with the Philippines the epicentre of the pandemic in South-East Asia.

“People in evacuation centers, of course, cannot follow social distancing measures,” said United Nations humanitarian coordinator Gustavo Gonzalez. “The lack of appropriate water access and sanitation represent also a health risk for an area that is also well known by previous cholera outbreaks.”

The only COVID-19 testing laboratory in the Bicol region, home to over 5.9 million people, was destroyed in the previous storm.

There was a social media backlash to President Rodrigo Duterte’s statement Thursday afternoon, when

he said that he wished to “swim” with the victims of the typhoon but that his security aides and doctors prevented him from doing so. Duterte made the remarks after the hashtag #NasaanAngPangulo (Where is the President?) trended on social media.

Over 3.8 million residents were left without power as the storm continued westwards and over 100,000 were evacuated. The storm left the Philippines with winds of 130kph (81mph) and gusts of up to 160kph (99mph).

Typhoon Vamco is the 21st tropical cyclone (TC) to hit the Philippines this year, which usually experiences an average of 20 TCs and is the most cyclone prone country in the world. An estimated 845,000 people were still in need of humanitarian assistance prior to the storm hitting Wednesday according to the United Nations.

PAGASA, the national meteorological agency, announced on Thursday that it is expecting one or two storms to hit in November, and possibly three in December. This year is particularly violent owing to the La Niña weather system, which sends accumulated warmer water into the northwest Pacific Ocean basin.

Numbers of studies have demonstrated the increasing intensity and longevity of tropical cyclones over the decades, owing to rising sea-water temperatures. This has severe implications for the highly-populated, coastal regions of east Asia, as damage caused by its high winds, floods and storm surges increases disproportionately, meaning a 15 percent rise in intensity leads to a 50 percent rise in destructive power.

Typhoon Goni earlier this month was by some metrics the most powerful recorded storm in history. Such indices and more point to the urgent need for international planning and resources devoted to dealing with the needs of the population, which is impossible under the capitalist profit system.

Ulysses is now tracking over the Philippine Sea towards Vietnam as a rapidly intensifying category-4 equivalent typhoon. It is expected to make landfall Sunday in Quang Binh province, a region which has been battered by floods and mudslides in recent months.



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