

Typhoon Rai death toll rises to 397 in the Philippines

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Two weeks after its initial landfall, the Philippines is still reeling from the consequences of Typhoon Rai, one of the most destructive typhoons in recent years. The official death toll rose to 397 people on Tuesday, and could continue to rise in the coming days.

The storm, known locally as Odette, struck the archipelago on December 16 and 17, packing wind speeds of 195km/h and laying waste to numerous southern and central regions.

At least 60 people remain missing amid prolonged and delayed efforts to clear the wreckage. Hundreds of others are injured, with many unable to access medical treatment. The devastation wreaked by the typhoon has reportedly displaced around 662,000 people, according to the United Nations (UN). While over 200,000 residents have sought refuge with relatives and friends, 418,000 are currently sheltering in evacuation camps stationed throughout the affected areas.

In a recent report, the UN warned of the potential for widespread COVID-19 transmission in these camps: “Children are starting to catch fever, colds, and coughs. Physical distancing and use of protective equipment such as masks are no longer observed in many evacuation centres.”

The Office of Civil Defense revealed that 4 million people were impacted by the typhoon, in 430 cities and towns where about 482,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. However, the true scale of the destruction remains unknown, as severe damage to communication lines, as well as roads, ports, and airports, has hindered the flow of information from the storm-ravaged regions.

Early estimates suggest that 23,000 hectares of rice were damaged, causing around 12,750 farmers to suddenly lose their livelihoods. In Cebu province, home to the country’s second-largest metropolitan region of

Cebu City, 24 of its 44 municipalities were severely damaged, with 80 to 90 percent of infrastructure destroyed.

Daily reports have emerged on social media over the past two weeks from displaced residents on their struggle to survive in the storm’s aftermath.

Photos and videos have depicted whole villages washed away in three-metre floods of sewage and power lines. Along with widespread cuts to internet and phone signals, basic supplies such as food, petrol, medicine, and clean drinking water are either in short supply or completely lacking for tens of thousands.

In Cebu City, free water refilling stations are being overwhelmed by enormous queues and are forced to rely on generators to produce potable water. Amid the lack of urgent rescue operations, the city’s residents have taken to Facebook to share information about where essential supplies are still available. An Australian tourist on the ground told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that many have no choice but to drink toilet water.

At least 140 people so far have fallen ill due to contaminated drinking water. In the southern province of Dinagat Islands, 80 people were diagnosed with acute gastroenteritis, while 54 were being treated for diarrhoea in hospital on the tourist resort island of Siargao, one of the hardest-hit areas. Cebu City recorded 16 diarrhoea cases linked to water interruption.

“Some areas still have tap water but pipes have been damaged and so there is a possibility of contamination,” health undersecretary Maria Rosario Vergere told reporters last week. She also revealed the typhoon had spoiled over 4,000 doses of coronavirus vaccines and damaged as many as 141 hospitals and health clinics, only 30 of which have resumed full

operations.

Local media have recently reported on deaths due to dehydration. According to radio station RMN Tacloban, based in the Eastern Visayas, two people in the village of Dapa on Siargao island died last week from dehydration amid a water shortage, several days after the typhoon first made landfall.

The typhoon has exacerbated already existing social tensions in impoverished regions of the Philippines which have reported the highest incidences of hunger and poverty over the past few months.

In Surigao del Norte, a province on the major southern island of Mindanao, photos on social media showed residents of Anahawan town carrying signs pleading for financial assistance to buy food. The province's disaster mitigation agency said 90 to 95 percent of homes had been damaged to some degree and 80 percent of residents were now homeless.

On Bohol Island, in response to ongoing food and power shortages, Governor Arthur Yap said the government's social welfare department had promised to send 35,000 food packets, a totally inadequate amount for the province's 375,000 families. Even these, however, had not yet arrived last week.

In an interview on DZBB radio network, Yap warned President Rodrigo Duterte, "If you would not send money for food, you should send soldiers and police, because if not, lootings will break out here." Thousands of military and police personnel have already been deployed to affected areas.

The Duterte government's response to this growing social catastrophe has been characterised by lengthy delays, insufficient financial aid, and criminal indifference.

After declaring a state of calamity in afflicted regions, Duterte allowed local authorities to impose price caps on commodities such as water. Emergency relief supplies only found their way to the typhoon's victims after being held up at some ports for days.

On December 23, a whole week after Typhoon Rai's landfall, Duterte ordered the release of a meagre \$US78 million to the six regions suffering in the typhoon's wake.

In a visit to Surigao and the Dinagat Islands, Duterte felt compelled to explain the lack of urgent measures to clean up wreckage and assist the hundreds of thousands of displaced Filipinos facing hunger and disease. He

claimed that most government funds set aside for relief had been depleted by the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I can promise to the people that help will arrive," he added. "Just give us a bit more time because there's a lot of paperwork in government. For every move you make, there's a layer of papers. Government works that way."

Typhoons are a regular feature of life in the Philippines, with an average of 20 cyclones recorded each year. Especially over the last decade, they have become more powerful and strengthened more rapidly due to warmer global temperatures caused by climate change. It is typical of Philippine governments to declare there is no money to address typhoon damage.

Although the official death toll is significantly lower at this stage, Typhoon Rai has been compared to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, which left 7,300 dead or missing and is the deadliest on record. At the time, President Benigno Aquino insisted funds were lacking to construct proper public housing, schools and hospitals, repair power transmission systems and water utilities.

In fact, Rai has done far greater damage to properties and crops than Haiyan, and has struck a society riddled with greater levels of poverty and an ongoing deadly pandemic.

The Duterte government's utter indifference for the plight of the typhoon victims is mirrored by its pro-business handling of the pandemic crisis and its aim to force the population to "live with the virus." Over nearly two years, Duterte has assured the corporations and banks that funds will not be lacking for them, funnelling multi-billion-dollar bailouts into the financial markets, while abandoning any effort to safeguard public health to ensure profit making continues unimpeded.



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