

36 workers killed in huge landfill collapse in the Philippines

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A massive garbage mound collapsed at the landfill in Cebu City, Philippines, on January 8. The industrial disaster has claimed 36 lives with the last deceased worker only discovered this past Sunday. Hundreds of rescue personnel had engaged in a treacherous search-and-rescue operation that was hampered by the risk of igniting methane gas and the threat of further collapses.

The collapse occurred seemingly without warning. It buried buildings that housed company offices and a warehouse where workers sorted recyclable waste. Speaking to the Associated Press, Jaylord Antigua, a 31-year-old office worker, described the avalanche of rubbish that destroyed his office. He was forced to crawl through the rubble, then: “I saw a light and crawled toward it in a hurry because I feared there would be more landslides... It was traumatic. I feared that it was my end.”

The Binaliw facility processes 1,000 tons of municipal solid waste daily and is privately operated by Prime Integrated Waste Solutions Inc. (PIWS), which acquired the site in 2023. It is a subsidiary of Prime Infrastructure Capital Incorporated owned by Filipino billionaire Enrique K. Razon Jr. In 2024, Prime Infrastructure reported a net income of PHP18.5 billion (\$US312 million) out of a gross revenue of PHP55 billion (\$US926 million).

Digging through trash, soil, steel, and other objects in the landfill, rescue efforts were perilously slow, taking a week and a half to locate all the workers killed in the accident. At least 18 other workers were pulled from the debris alive and four remain hospitalized.

Cebu Mayor Nestor Archival described the extreme difficulty of the operation, saying, “This is not like other landslides that you can just excavate. If you pull from the top, the bottom is soft... it might get worse.” In addition, the presence of methane gas, a highly

flammable byproduct of decomposing waste, prevented the use of equipment that could cause sparks, forcing rescuers to work largely by hand.

Workers as well as local officials have pointed to the poor waste management practices at the facility as the cause of the landfill collapse. Joey Boy Gealon, 28, an office worker at the facility, said, “We are just workers. We already felt it was dangerous because the garbage was very high.”

The landfill site had previously been the subject of investigations, complaints, and warnings, meaning that the disaster was entirely predictable and therefore preventable. The Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) pointed to the fact that landfill had reached a dangerous height of 35 meters while having slope instability and inadequate drainage.

Inspections made in 2024 and 2025 found that the Binaliw site was in violation of the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act and was operating as an open dump site. PIWS, the company that operates the facility, also faced accusations of water contamination and illegal earth-moving.

Cebu City Councilor Joel Garganera said that “the pileup of garbage in Binaliw has far exceeded safety limits and prolonged heavy rainfall may have weakened the stability of the garbage mound, as accumulated trash tends to absorb water like a sponge.” Yet neither the local government nor any other officials took steps to enforce safety measures.

In the past several months, the Philippines has dealt with large amounts of rain caused by the country’s annual rainy season and large typhoons that have struck repeatedly, including Typhoons Fung-wong and Kalmaegi in November. These are believed to have contributed to the Binaliw disaster.

Garganera also stated, “Operators had been cutting

into the mountain, mining the soil, and then piling garbage to form another mountain of waste. It's not a sanitary landfill. It's already an open dumpsite."

While local authorities claimed that they had raised concerns over the landfill in the past, they were quick to deflect blame, stating that only the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) had the authority to take action against PIWS. The DENR is well known for being rife with corruption, something that was exposed last year following massive flooding.

While Manila allocates billions of dollars for infrastructure, this money often gets diverted into so-called "ghost projects" in which the money disappears without any work being carried out. Therefore, whether it is for flood control measures or sanitary waste management, the ruling class profits while leaving the working class to suffer the brunt of disasters.

The Binaliw disaster follows a well-worn pattern in the Philippines, where environmental and safety regulations are ignored in collusion with establishment politicians. The Mines and Geosciences Bureau for the region has long identified many areas in Central Visayas as landslide-prone, particularly where "people have altered the natural landscapes or stripped its vegetation."

The Cebu landfill collapse lays bare yet again the incompatibility of the capitalist system with a safe and sustainable environment. Nothing has been done to prevent landslides or the turning of the environment into a massive garbage dump in order to allow private developers to turn a profit.

Under capitalism, waste management is not a public service but a lucrative business. The needs of the population for clean air, water, and soil are subordinated to the balance sheets of companies like Prime Integrated Waste Solutions.

Nor is the Binaliw disaster an isolated event. It is a gruesome echo of past tragedies that have taken place over many years and have provoked public outrage, but never any changes.

In September 2018, a landslide in Naga, Cebu was triggered by heavy rains and quarrying operations and killed 78 people. That disaster also followed official warnings that were ignored. Then-president Rodrigo Duterte vowed relocations and support, but the fundamental drive for profit from resource extraction remained untouched.

In July 2000, a garbage avalanche at a dumpsite in Quezon City, Metro Manila, killed 218 people, according to official data, and left 300 people missing. Many of the casualties were scavengers living in a shantytown on the dump's slopes.

This disaster prompted the passage of the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act of 2000, which mandated the closure of open dumpsites but a quarter-century later, the law exists only on paper as demonstrated by the recent Binaliw tragedy.

The profit-driven, lethal practice of open dumping continues under corporate management as the capitalist ruling class treats the lives of workers and the poor as expendable. As with past disasters, nothing will change after the landfill collapse in Cebu under the capitalist system no matter what promises politicians make or toothless regulations are passed.



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