

Typhoon Haiyan: Disaster Follows Disaster in the Philippines

By [Nicole Colson](#)

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by Alessandro Tinonga and Nicole Colson

“Worse than hell.” That’s how Magina Fernandez, a survivor of Typhoon Haiyan in the now-decimated Philippines city of Tacloban, [described the aftermath of the storm to CNN](#).

With 10,000 or more estimated dead, entire cities leveled and hundreds of thousands of weary survivors desperately seeking supplies and relief, Haiyan has caused – on top of the massive storm destruction across the country – a humanitarian crisis of immense proportions.

And behind the immediate crisis caused by the storm are a series of questions that demand answers: What made Haiyan so powerful – perhaps the strongest storm in recorded history? Could the island nation of the Philippines have been better prepared? And above all else: What will it take to help the survivors now – and make sure a repeat of this devastation never occurs?

Category 5 Storm

Typhoon Haiyan was a Category 5 storm and one of the largest ever to have made landfall. It battered the Philippines – a nation of more than 7,000 islands, located in the Pacific Ocean, southeast of the Asian continent – starting on Friday, November 8, with wind gusts of up to 235 miles an hour. By Sunday, reports of catastrophic devastation and massive casualties had begun to emerge.

The city of Tacloban – the capital of the Leyte province on the eastern edge of the Philippines – was hit particularly hard. No building seems to have escaped damage, and the death toll has been getting worse by the day. The sea level rose by as much as 13 feet, and water from the storm surge flowed more than half a mile inland. [As the New York Times described the city](#):

“Shattered buildings line every road of this once-thriving city of 220,000, and many of the streets are still so clogged with debris from nearby buildings that they are barely discernible. The civilian airport terminal here has shattered walls and gaping holes in the roof where steel beams protrude, twisted and torn by winds far more powerful than those of Hurricane Katrina when it made landfall near New Orleans in 2005.

“Decomposing bodies still lie along the roads, like the corpse in a pink, short-sleeved shirt and blue shorts facedown in a puddle 100 yards from the airport. Just down the road lies a church that was supposed to be an evacuation center, but is littered with the bodies of those who drowned inside.”

Complicating an accurate count of the dead is the fact that the storm surge was of tsunami-like proportions – in some areas, an unknown number of people were swept out to sea. Survivors in hard-hit areas are reportedly burying the dead in mass graves.

There are other cities and villages like Tacloban. Baco, a city of 35,000 in Mindoro province, was 80 per cent under water, according to United Nations reports. In Daanbantayan, the northernmost tip of Cebumainland, an estimated 98 per cent of homes and structures had been damaged. According to Oxfam, a town hall and cultural center that had served as evacuation centers had to be evacuated themselves because of storm damage.

As this article was being written, rescuers still had not been able to reach several cities – and the situation was dire in those localities that they could. In Eastern Samar province’s Guiuan township, Oxfam officials reported seeing children begging, holding up signs reading, “Help. We need water, food and medicines.”

[In footage taken by a Philippines news channel](#), an unidentified woman tells the camera, “I have no house, I have no clothes. I don’t know how I will restart my life, I am so confused. I don’t know what happened to us. We are appealing for help. Whoever has a good heart, I appeal to you – please help Guiuan.”

Responding to the disaster, President Benigno Aquino III declared a state of national emergency and mobilized the army to bring relief to storm survivors and organize rescue efforts. U.S. officials have also pledged to send help. But as the days pass, the scope of the humanitarian crisis is far outpacing the assistance from the likes of the U.S. government – whose first wave of rescue workers consisted of 90 Marines and sailors.

In Tacloban, there were reports of “looting” in the aftermath of the storm. In response, Aquino declared martial law and ordered 300 troops and police to be deployed to the city in personnel carriers. But such “looting” is the only option for desperate survivors trying to find food, clean water and shelter – a clear indication of how critical the situation is, and how ineffective the government has been in providing help.

“The scene is one of utter devastation,” Tata Abella-Bolo, a member of Oxfam International’s emergency team on the central island of Cebu, [described in a statement](#). “There is no electricity in the entire area and no water. Local emergency food stocks have been distributed, but stocks are dwindling. The immediate need is for water, both for drinking and cleaning.”

As survivor Magina Fernandez begged CNN, “Get international help to come here now – not tomorrow, now.”

Super Typhoon

Typhoons are a regular occurrence in the Philippines, but as the rate of global warming-induced climate change has increased, so have the number and strength of the storms. Haiyan is the third Category 5 “super typhoon” to hit the Philippines since 2010.

Haiyan was made more devastating by the fact that it hit landfall at peak intensity, and swept into the Philippines in a broad bay – making storm surges worse.

While no single storm can be taken as evidence of climate change, the growing number of

“superstorms” is viewed by scientists as a direct result of the warming of the oceans and the climate. [According to Romulo Virola](#), head of the Philippines government’s national statistics board:

“Menacingly, the Filipino typhoons are getting stronger and stronger, especially since the ’90s. From 1947 to 1960, the strongest typhoon to hit us was Amy in December 1951 with a highest wind speed recorded at 240 kilometers per hour in Cebu. From 1961 to 1980, Sening was the record-holder with a highest wind speed of 275 kilometers per hour in October 1970. During the next 20 years, the highest wind speed was recorded by Anding and Rosing at 260 kilometers per hour. In the current millennium, the highest wind speed has soared to 320 kilometers per hour, recorded by Reming in November-December 2006. If this is due to climate change, we better be prepared for even stronger ones in the future.”

As this article was being written, Philippines climate negotiator Naderev “Yeb” Saño told delegates at the start of the 19th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP19) that Typhoon Haiyan had prompted him to [begin a hunger strike](#) until “clear progress” was made on climate change:

“What my country is going through as a result of this extreme climate event is madness. The climate crisis is madness. We can stop this madness...We can take drastic action now to ensure that we prevent a future where super typhoons are a way of life. Because we refuse, as a nation, to accept a future where super typhoons like Haiyan become a fact of life. We refuse to accept that running away from storms, evacuating our families, suffering the devastation and misery, having to count our dead, become a way of life. We simply refuse to. ... Typhoons such as Haiyan and its impacts represent a sobering reminder to the international community that we cannot afford to delay climate action.”

Yet many countries, led by the most powerful among them, like the U.S., have continued to delay significant action to curb greenhouse gas pollution. On the contrary, the U.S. government continues to implement policies that protect the interests of big business – and in particular, the fossil fuel industry – [despite overwhelming scientific consensus](#) on the impact and cause of climate change.

While it is impossible to stop weather events like storms from taking place, the increasing frequency of superstorms seems almost certainly a consequence of man-made climate change, whose chief instigators are fossil fuel companies and the governments that support them. Yet international measures to confront climate change have been frustrated by major governments, including the U.S., [where the Obama administration has put profits before the environment](#). The U.S. bears a large part of the responsibility for [blocking action at an international level](#).

And who is paying the price? As is so often the case when it comes to the environment, the chief victims of policies engineered in the most powerful countries are the poor in countries like the Philippines, with a less developed infrastructure and fewer resources in times of crisis.

Yeb Saño issued a challenge to those who would deny climate change or try to slow down measures to curb global warming:

“I dare them, I dare them to get off their ivory towers and away from the comfort of their armchairs.

“I dare them to go to the islands of the Pacific, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and see the impacts of rising sea levels; to the mountainous regions of the Himalayas and the Andes to see communities confronting glacial floods; to the Arctic where communities grapple with the fast dwindling sea ice caps; to the large deltas of the Mekong, the Ganges, the Amazon, the Nile, where lives and livelihoods are drowned; to the hills of Central America that confront similar monstrous hurricanes; to the vast savannas of Africa where climate change has likewise become a matter of life and death, as food and water become scarce.

“Not to forget the monster hurricanes in the Gulf of Mexico and the eastern seaboard of North America as well as the fires that razed ‘Down Under.’ And if that is not enough, you may want to pay a visit to the Philippines right now...

“We have entered a new era that demands global solidarity in order to fight climate change and ensure that the pursuit of sustainable human development remains at the fore of the global community’s efforts. We cannot sit and stay helpless staring at this international climate stalemate. It is now time to raise ambition and take action.”

Compounding the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan are the social inequities of the Philippines. Well before the storm and the economic crisis, most Filipinos struggled to survive in a system fraught with poverty, corruption and super-exploitation.

Despite much fanfare about its annual economic growth of more than 7 per cent, 28.6 per cent of Filipinos still live under the official (and understated) poverty level. One in four Filipinos live on a dollar a day, 20 per cent lack access to electricity, and nearly one-third of the population are unable to provide for basic food and shelter.

All the while, the superrich continue reap the benefits of the exploitation of the Philippines people. As Pepe Escobar wrote in *Asia Times Online*: “One family, the Ayalas, controls 18 per cent of total stock market-listed corporate assets. Moreover, the country’s top 10 most powerful families control 56.2 per cent of such assets. Just over 50 per cent of total GDP is controlled by the top 15 families.”

In a country with millions living in poverty, natural disasters will continue to cause massive casualties. With the wealth of society being drained away from the mass of the population for the benefit of a small clique, many are left without the means to properly prepare for a storm or its aftermath. A massive undertaking is needed to make sure that the Philippines masses are provided the means to endure a storm and survive with a decent standard of living.

But the government of President Benigno Aquino has continued the agenda of austerity and neoliberalism by pushing for more deregulation, cutting social benefits to the poor and those in need, and pushing privatization. Aquino has proved to be unwilling and unable to change the country’s gross inequality. To strengthen the hand of the state, he is inviting more assistance and collaboration with the U.S. military, as well as spending \$1.7-billion to buy more weapons and warships.

Right now, the people of the Philippines need our support and solidarity with the relief efforts. Concurrently, struggles to change the desperate social inequities in their country must be supported.

Internationally, we all need to work together to stop the humanitarian disasters that will

come with the superstorms borne by climate change. •

Alessandro Tinonga and Nicole Colson write for [Socialist Worker](#) where this article first appeared.

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