

Typhoon Mangkhut kills dozens in the Philippines, leaves trail of destruction in China and Hong Kong

By Oscar Grenfell
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At least 100 people are presumed dead in the Philippines after Typhoon Mangkhut, described by experts as the most severe storm of 2018, struck the country's north on Saturday. Over the following days, the typhoon left a trail of destruction across parts of Asia, including Hong Kong and southern China.

According to Philippine authorities, 64 people have been confirmed dead in the wake of the storm. Many of them were killed by landslides, flash flooding and the collapse of makeshift accommodation that stood no chance of withstanding the storm, which was the equivalent of a category five hurricane when it battered the Philippines.

There are fears that the death toll will rapidly rise. Rescue teams are only beginning to arrive in the most remote rural areas, and an unknown number of people remain buried after extensive landslides. Hundreds more have suffered injuries. Dozens of villages have been effectively cut-off from the outside world, as a result of the damage to roads. It is estimated that the storm affected some 5.7 million people across the Philippines.

As in previous disasters to hit the storm-prone country, the poor and sections of the workforce engaged in low-paid, precarious work have been the hardest hit.

At least 43 gold miners perished in a landslide in the municipality of Itogon in the northern province of Benguet. They were among hundreds of small-scale miners prospecting at a site that had been abandoned by Benguet Corporation, a major mining entity. The workers and their families were in makeshift shelters that were inundated with mud and top soil.

According to the *New York Times*, the workers

claimed to have formed a collective and struck a deal with Benguet to mine the site, in exchange for the company receiving a cut of any profits. The corporation has denied the claim.

The Philippines president, Rodrigo Duterte, declared at a press conference on Monday that it was necessary to "Give Mother Earth a respite from endless digging." His administration has claimed that it will investigate the mining operation at Itogon, and has posted troops at the site to prevent any further prospecting.

Duterte's move is cynical posturing, aimed at defusing growing anger over the degradation of the environment and the tragic death of the miners. Successive governments and local authorities have tacitly endorsed illegal mining and logging activities that involve major corporations.

The prevalence of small-scale mining, which involves up to 400,000 people across the country, is an expression of endemic poverty and limited job opportunities. One of the surviving miners at the site told the *New York Times* that he began working in the mines at the age of 15, and would work round-the-clock, two-week shifts, during which he would conduct dangerous dynamiting, punctuated only by occasional five-hour breaks.

Farmers and other sections of the rural and regional poor have also been devastated by the storm.

In comments to the *Guardian*, residents of Tuguegarao, the capital of the country's northern Cagayan province, described fear and panic as the storm struck in the early hours of Saturday morning.

One woman commented, "I was scared, it was the sound of the wind that scared me, and then I heard a loud crash." She pointed to a tree that had pummelled a

piece of corrugated metal that appeared to have been part of a fence before the storm.

Local authorities declared a “state of calamity” in the city, as its streets were strewn with polls, and many of its houses and small businesses were destroyed.

Farmers desperately sought to save their crops, but in many cases, to no avail. Some have lost acres of rice and food crops, which will exacerbate already high rates of poverty and food insecurity.

One petrol station attendant told the *Guardian*, “We have had no electricity here since 8pm on September 14, before the typhoon hit. It could take weeks or months to fix. This puts me out of work. And we are already struggling with funds for food. Maybe the government will help. The problem is with a food shortage, prices will rise.”

Questions are already emerging about the extent of government preparedness for the disaster. In many affected areas, there were no official evacuation centres. In some cases, those that did exist were ill-equipped to cope with the magnitude of the storm.

The rescue efforts in rural areas also appeared a shambles and lacking in funds. Rescue workers, along with locals, have been forced to dig through mud in a bid to find survivors. Workers without electricity or running water have no indication as to when their basic utilities will be restored. This has also prompted warnings of disease outbreaks.

This mirrors previous natural disasters in the Philippines. In 2013, the country was battered by Typhoon Haiyan, which killed over 7,000 people. Government agencies had not worked out any coordinated response before the storm struck. For days afterwards, survivors were forced to seek out food, water and shelter with virtually no government assistance.

Typhoon Mangkhut also left a trail of destruction in Hong Kong and Southern China. More than 1,000 roads were blocked in Hong Kong yesterday, after the storm felled trees and powerlines and knocked out traffic lights.

An estimated three million people were evacuated from southern China. Four people reportedly perished in the storm, which lashed the country with gale force winds and resulted in flooding in some areas. Widespread damage was also reported in the gambling hub of Macau, which was struck by head-high

flash-flooding amid the disaster.

While storms are not uncommon in the region at this time of year, scientists have noted an increase in their frequency and intensity.

While there is no data directly linking Typhoon Mangkhut to climate change caused by human activity, Katharine Hayhoe, a Texas University professor and atmospheric scientist, told the *Huffington Post*: “We do know that, on average, climate change is making storms stronger, causing them to intensify faster, increasing the amount of rainfall associated with a given storm, and even making them move more slowly.”

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