

Far from cities and supplies, remote communities struggle to survive after losing lives, homes and boats to typhoon

BAGUIO CITY, Philippines/WARSAW, Poland, 15 November 2013—In the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, which killed an untold number of people, displaced 630,000 and devastated central Philippines, the country's indigenous peoples—most of whom are located in isolated, forested communities, far away from cities and supplies—are emerging as among the worst hit.

As they struggle to survive and assess damage to the natural resources they preserve and maintain for their incomes and food, an estimated 1,600 indigenous families are struggling to secure basic supplies that could help them to survive--and rebuild their lives.

The indigenous Tagbanua communities, spread out across the Calamianes, a group of islands in the southwest province of Palawan, were severely impacted when the typhoon made its sixth landfall.

On Coron island, a popular tourist destination famous for its serene lakes and white sand beaches, 50 people died and nearly all of the community's houses were destroyed. The community—home to 700 families—has lost most of its boats, eliminating its primary mode of transport and income.

Coron mayor Clara Reyes told a local television station that 90 percent of the island's houses

and hotels are either totally or partly damaged and only 10 of the 1,000 registered pump boats used for tourism remain, threatening the islanders' tourism-related income. She said that it could take six months to a year for the island to recover.

On Tara island, a storm surge triggered by the typhoon caused numerous casualties and destroyed homes and infrastructure. Some 900 families were impacted.

Indigenous communities on these island and across the Calamianes remain isolated from relief efforts. Facing starvation, they have one basic but crucial need—rubber boats, their lifeline to supplies, including rice, gasoline and energy, said Ruel Belen, the Palawan coordinator of Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (Pafid), an organization that assesses and addresses the problems faced by indigenous communities.

“All of their boats were washed out, so we need rubber boats to transport much-needed food and other relief goods to these communities,” said Belen

Because the national government and international organizations are focusing their relief efforts on densely-populated Tacloban, the capital of the Leyte province, which received the brunt of the typhoon's damage, indigenous peoples have received little support. Belen is currently working with a network of indigenous peoples' organizations and support groups to send them relief and raise money for their recovery.

“As of now, the few food relief packs that have been distributed are mainly concentrated in the evacuation centers of populous cities like Tacloban and do not reach the interior indigenous communities at all,” said Luz Brozula, a program coordinator with the Integrated Development Program for Indigenous People in Southern Tagalog (IDPIP-ST), an organization that supports indigenous peoples in the region.

The Philippines, an archipelago nation of more than 7,000 islands, is pummelled yearly by tropical storms and typhoons (called hurricanes and cyclones in other parts of the world). The impoverished and densely populated nation of 96 million people is in the northwestern Pacific, sits in the path of the world's most fearsome typhoon corridor, according to meteorologists. The eastern seaboard is the most vulnerable.

Haiyan was an especially dire catastrophe, even for a country accustomed to storms. Its winds were among the strongest ever recorded, and, though estimates are changing as the damage is assessed, it is potentially deadlier than Thelma, which killed about 5,100 people when it hit central Philippines in 1991.

As the paths of hurricanes and cyclones in the archipelago have shifted into once typhoon-free areas, climate change observers have noted that the Philippines is not ready prepared for abnormal climate disturbances like Haiyan.

Some groups in the Philippines are prepared for changes to the climate. The indigenous Ivatan of the Batanes Group of Islands in northern Philippines, for example, have learned to adapt to the harsh weather conditions that strike every year between June and December. They have, for example, built stone houses that could withstand the worst typhoon ever.

The typhoon figured prominently in the on-going climate change talks in Warsaw, especially after the tearful Philippine envoy announced that he would fast "until a meaningful outcome is in sight."

"We can fix this," Naderev Sano said at a press conference in the Polish capital. "We can stop this madness. Right now, right here."

Tebtebba executive director Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, who is currently in Warsaw, Poland for the climate change talks, urged governments, particularly those in the developed world, to make drastic cuts in their greenhouse emissions and support the Green Climate Fund (GCF).

The GCF is a fund within the framework of UN Framework Convention on Climate Change founded as "a mechanism to transfer money from the developed to the developing world to help developing countries in adaptation and mitigation practices to counter climate change."

"What we are experiencing now in the Philippines demands greater ambition by industrialized

countries to cut their carbon emissions. Time is running out, and we, indigenous peoples, will again be severely affected. We also urge governments to commit funding to the GCF and support our call for the climate funds to give direct assistance to our devastated communities."

Additional Information

In addition to the Tagbanua, other typhoon-battered groups in the Philippines include the Tagbanua Calamianen, Batak, Magara, Caramay, Tanabag, Iratag and Tagnipa in the Palawan towns of Roxas, El Nido and Puerto Princesa. The Integrated Development Program for Indigenous People in Southern Tagalog (IDPIP-ST) reported that 52 Tabanag, 15 Iratag and 60 Tagniba families are affected by the typhoon.

In the neighboring Oriental Mindoro province, 2,500 families belonging to the Mangyan Hanunuo tribe in the communities of Bulalacao, San Roque, Mansalay and Panaytayan are dealing with the storm's aftermath. Another 1,000 families of the Mangyan Buhid, Bangon, Tadyawan, Mangyan Alangan and Iraya tribes in the communities of Bongabon, Socorro, Baco and Bayanan are impacted.

In Occidental Mindoro province, hundreds of families of the Hanunuo, Gubatnon, Buhid, Batangan and Alangan tribes were similarly battered in the communities of Magsaysay, San Jose, Rizal, Calintaan, Sablayan and Batasan.

Also affected were the Dumagat and Remontado tribes in the provinces of northern Quezon and Rizal and the Ati and other indigenous tribes in Visayan islands of Capiz, Aklan, Antique and Iloilo. ***[Tebtebba Indigenous Information Service, with support from Burness Communications]***