

Ketsana leaves more than 300 dead across SE Asia

By ROHAN SULLIVAN, Associated Press Writer Rohan Sullivan, Associated Press Writer – 6 MINS AGO

MANILA, Philippines – One of the most destructive storms in years extended its deadly path across Southeast Asia, blowing down wooden villages in Cambodia and crushing Vietnamese houses under mudslides after submerging much of the Philippine capital.

The death toll Wednesday climbed to 331 and was still rising.

"We're used to storms that sweep away one or two houses. But I've never seen a storm this strong," said Nam Tum, governor of Cambodia's Kampong Thom province.

The immediate threat eased as Typhoon Ketsana was downgraded to a tropical depression as it crossed Wednesday into a fourth nation, Laos. But its powerful winds and pummeling rain left a snaking trail of destruction.

Landslides triggered by the storm slammed into houses in central Vietnam on Tuesday, burying people including five members of the same family, the government said. The country's toll rose to 74 as officials recovered more bodies from the muck and swollen rivers, with 179 injured and a dozen missing, the government said late Wednesday.

It said the storm destroyed or damaged nearly 180,000 homes, inundated 150,000 more, and flattened crops across central Vietnam. More than 350,000 people were evacuated from the typhoon's path, posing a logistical headache to shelter and feed them.

"The scale of the devastation is stretching all of us," said Minnie Portales, a World Vision aid agency official in the Philippines. The agency said it was scrambling to assess the needs of victims in four countries, including the possibility that Laos would have damage.

Parts of two Vietnamese provinces remained cut off by floodwaters and downed trees and power lines on roads, officials said.

In neighboring Cambodia, at least 11 people were killed and 29 injured Tuesday as the storm toppled dozens of rickety houses and swept away residents in the two provinces north of the capital that were hit. About 100 houses were destroyed and 400 others damaged, said Ly Thuch of the country's disaster management committee.

Five members of the same family died when their house collapsed as they ate dinner, said Neth Sophana of the Red Cross.

Authorities were searching for more victims and rushing food, medical supplies and plastic sheeting for temporary tents to storm-hit areas.

Light rain fell over some parts of the disaster zone Wednesday, but most rivers had peaked and were starting to slowly recede, Vietnam's National Weather Forecast Center said.

The cleanup task was enormous.

In the Philippines, Ketsana on Saturday triggered the worst flooding in 40 years across a swath of the island nation's north and submerged riverside districts of the sprawling capital of 12 million people.

Officials said 2.3 million people had their homes swamped, and 400,000 were seeking help in relief centers hastily set up in schools and other public buildings — even the presidential palace. The Philippines death toll stood at 246, with 42 people missing.

Frustration boiled over at some sites.

Flood victims rushed at an army helicopter delivering boxes of clothes to a relief center in Rodriguez town in hard-hit Rizal province just east of the capital, an Associated Press photographer at the scene said. No one was apparently injured.

Elsewhere in Rizal, a mob hurled rocks and tried unsuccessfully to block a relief convoy as it passed by.

"Apparently victims who were hoping to receive the relief goods blocked the convoy," police official Leopoldo Bataoil told The AP.

Philippines National Disaster Coordinating Council chief Gilbert Teodoro said the culprits more likely wanted the relief goods to sell, and warned authorities would crack down on looters or other troublemakers.

"We appeal to our countrymen not to use this occasion to do something bad," he told reporters.

The international relief effort picked up pace, with condolence messages coming from Britain's Queen Elizabeth II, the EU, Japan, Germany and other nations. Many added pledges of aid to help the recovery.

Three helicopters and 30 rubber boats were being sent by the United Nations and would arrive within 72 hours, Teodoro said late Wednesday.

Philippine military spokesman Lt. Col. Romeo Brawner said at least 30 U.S. Marines and Air Force personnel who were to attend two annual war exercises in the country would join the relief work, bringing trucks, bulldozers and forklifts.

At relief centers, women and children clutching bags of belongings lined up for bottled water, boiled eggs and packets of instant noodles for a fourth day. Men waded through thick, gooey sludge back to their homes to clean up the mess with shovels and brooms.

Manila's main downtown business and tourist district was largely unscathed.

Another tropical storm edged toward the southern Philippines on Wednesday packing potentially destructive winds and rain, government forecasters said. It was 560 miles (900 kilometers) off the coast late Wednesday and may hit at the weekend if it stays on its present course.

The government estimated the damage cost at more than \$100 million.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090930/ap_on_re_as/as_asia_storm