

Philippines: 2-week death toll reaches more than 600

By Artemio Dumlao (The Philippine Star) Updated October 11, 2009 12:00 AM

MANILA, Philippines - Two weeks of killer storms have resulted in the deaths of at least 636 people in a large swathe of Luzon, with more than 300,000 still crammed into makeshift evacuation centers in many parts of Metro Manila.

Floodwaters from typhoon "Pepeng" (international codename: Parma) have receded somewhat in much of Pangasinan but the toll rose to 299 confirmed dead in landslides and flooding, officials said.

The death and devastation began on Sept. 26 when tropical storm "Ondoy" (international codename: Ketsana) unleashed a month's worth of rain in Metro Manila, Rizal and other adjoining provinces. It was the worst flooding in the country in 40 years.

Pepeng, on the other hand, ravaged mostly northern Luzon, particularly Cagayan Valley, Pangasinan and Benguet.

Civil defense spokesman Ernesto Torres said that among the latest fatalities in landslides in Benguet were three firemen who were carrying out rescue operations at the landslide site.

"In our area, we already have 148 recovered cadavers," said Benguet Gov. Nestor Fongwan.

"The number of missing, we can't really be certain," as there is no way to tell how many were buried, he said.

Casualty figures vary. A report from Regional Disaster Coordinating Council chairman Chief Superintendent Orlando Pestaño placed the total number of dead in the Cordillera region at 221.

In Mt. Province, which suffered similar avalanches, Gov. Maximo Dalog appealed for medicine, food and K-9 dogs to find the dead.

Dalog said there were 35 dead in his province alone with at least 16 others still missing after heavy rains brought by Pepeng caused massive landslides that buried houses late Thursday to Friday.

Baguio City remained inaccessible as rockslides had cut off all major roads, said Mayor Peter Rey Bautista.

"The past two days have been very hard for the whole city and surrounding areas. But we are finally seeing the sunshine," he said in a television interview.

Telecommunication services are down in Baguio City. There were reportedly long queues of people outside groceries, gas stations, and drug stores.

With the rising death toll, even coffins have become scarce.

Government engineers are preparing to reopen Kennon Road, which they believe is easier to clear than Naguillan Road and Marcos Highway.

In Pangasinan, floodwaters that had swamped the area had largely subsided but they left a sea of mud that made travel difficult.

Dagupan City was still flooded, with people forced to wade through deep water, while roads remained impassable to small vehicles.

Pounding rains prompted authorities to discharge excess water from swollen dams.

The deluge caused the Agno River and surrounding dikes to burst their banks, inundating 30 out of 48 towns, a scene of mayhem that sent residents onto rooftops, scrambling for safety.

Better weather allowed the Philippine Coast Guard and US Navy helicopters to pluck people marooned on roofs and treetops.

About 1,000 people remained stranded in the mall as night fell Friday. Others whose houses were flooded retreated to higher floors or were staying with relatives and neighbors.

Pepeng, which first hit the country as a typhoon on Oct. 3, sat off the northern Philippines for a week before dumping heavy rain on the region on Thursday and Friday.

It finally moved away late Friday and was charted 250 kilometers northwest of Dagupan yesterday, slowly moving west into the South China Sea, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) said.

Pagasa warned that two to six more weather disturbances may hit the country before the end of the year.

Pepeng had hit just a week after Ondoy struck the capital and surrounding areas, causing massive floods. Some low-lying areas remain flooded two weeks later.

Floods hamper rescue efforts

US military helicopters were on standby to help the Philippine Air Force deliver aid to areas cut off by road, as flooded highways hampered the search for people trapped in houses buried by mud.

Rescue operations were centered in flooded Pangasinan and the worst landslide-hit provinces of Benguet, Mt. Province and the resort city of Baguio, where most of the deaths occurred.

Residents were jolted awake by the rumbling sound of mudslides and floodwaters tearing apart the saturated soil and washing away homes.

A 17-year-old boy was rescued from the rubble in his home in Baguio late Friday, and five others were pulled out alive in Mt. Province, said regional civil defense official Olive Luces.

"We are positive that we can still recover live victims. We don't think of the negative," Luces said. "However difficult it is, our volunteers do not lose hope."

Luces said 120 bodies have been recovered in Benguet, 62 in Baguio, and 15 in Mt. Province.

The sun was peeking through the clouds over Baguio and volunteers, mostly miners, were taking advantage of the relatively good weather to step up the search for survivors, Luces said.

She also called on local communities to help clear debris blocking the roads.

Army engineers were trying to remove mounds of mud and boulders on one road to Baguio. The public works department was clearing debris on another highway to the city, but an 82-foot stretch of the mountain road had been washed away, cutting off all traffic, she said.

La Trinidad Mayor Artemio Galwan said 78 bodies have been recovered there. He appealed for shovels and other tools as well as portable spotlights to allow volunteers to continue digging at night.

He said the rains and landslides devastated crops in his area, regarded as the country's salad bowl for its vegetable farms and strawberry fields.

Nearly the entire village of Kibungan in Benguet was buried under tons of mud and debris, regional disaster relief officer Rex Manuel said.

Rescuers used pulleys and cables to transport the dead they retrieved from the rubble.

TV footage showed the bodies arriving in black bags in a hall in Baguio, where relatives wept after recognizing their loved ones.

"There was a sudden rumble above us, and then the houses at the bottom were gone, including them," said Melody Coronel, pointing to the relatives she found among the dead.

In Buyagan village, only three out of about 100 houses remained visible after Thursday night's landslide buried most structures there. Some 50 residents were saved and seven bodies recovered, Manuel said.

Two US Navy ships were anchored in the Lingayen Gulf in Pangasinan with Marines and sailors ready to deploy for rescue and relief operations, said Armed Forces of the Philippines spokesman Lt. Col. Romeo Brawner.

The US Marines brought with them eight CH-46 helicopters to complement the same number of Vietnam War-era UH-1H helicopters of the Philippine Air Force to carry relief goods and other supplies to the isolated mountain region.

"The focus is on the Cordillera," Brawner said. "The roads are impassable and the only way to reach Baguio is by air."

He said the helicopters will try to penetrate the fog-shrouded mountains to drop off supplies at the Baguio airport, from where they can be distributed by land. – **With Jun Elias, Eva Visperas, Jaime Laude, Marvin Sy and AP**

