

Pray for Philippines, 'Desperate' After Typhoon

The reality of exactly how bad things are in the Philippines is just starting to come into focus.

A record-setting typhoon with sustained winds of 195 mph decimated the central part of this country early Friday morning, leaving behind so much destruction that many places are impossible to reach by road.

An estimated 4 million people have been impacted by Typhoon Haiyan, including more than 650,000 Filipinos displaced, according to news reports, and the death toll is feared to be 10,000 people in Tacloban city alone.

"The destruction is like a bomb," says James Tioco, national leadership coordinator for Operation Christmas Child (OCC) in the Philippines. "The Tacloban city region is completely flattened. And the only way to go is by boat."

Tioco lives in Manila, more than 500 miles—and 13 hours by car—to Tacloban city, ground zero for this tragedy. But as the local coordinator for Samaritan's Purse DART (Disaster Assistance Response Team), he's been in contact with many of the pastors, who are "desperate and distraught."

And the situation, according to Tioco, is about as dire as you can imagine.

"It's a very similar effect as the tsunami that hit Indonesia," Tioco says. "It's like a tsunami, where the wave from the sea just came and washed the whole town away."

"Yesterday, I was on the phone with one of the regional coordinators for OCC. He was almost speechless. We asked him to describe what he was seeing, and he was almost in tears."

Bantayan Island, north of Cebu City, was also hit extremely hard. Tioco heard of one evacuation center that collapsed when it was full of people, claiming the lives of about 600.

"They're going through the debris, looking for more bodies," Tioco says. "The newspaper today is calling it the worst disaster in Philippines' history."

Samaritan's Purse is on the ground, helping deliver aid to those most in need. Items being rushed to these areas include community water filters, protective tarps, blankets, hygiene kits and emergency family food packets.

"We will do everything we can to provide for their needs," says Franklin Graham, CEO and president of Samaritan's Purse and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA). "We'll be there not only to provide survivors with physical aid, but also to share God's love and bring hope to their communities."

Tioco, who is helping coordinate the relief effort, is well connected with churches around the Philippines, having served as the national coordinator in 2006 for BGEA's My Hope, which saw 22,000 churches involved in the nationwide outreach.

But even all the connections in the world can't help Tioco reach every pastor. "Communication is difficult," he says. "Sixty-seven cellphone towers are down."

Tioco says 250 churches involved with Operation Christmas Child have been impacted by the typhoon; many of those were also involved with My Hope along with other BGEA outreach events in both Manila (Billy Graham Crusade, 1977; Franklin Graham Festival, 2006) and the Bicol region (Will Graham Celebration, 2011).

"We are still conducting our assessments with local churches," says Tioco, who at age 15 gave his life to Christ at the 1977 Billy Graham Manila crusade. "The main challenge is getting to the areas most needed."

BGEA also launched its Search for Jesus Internet evangelism ministry in the Philippines () in 2012. Tioco is hoping the relief effort over the coming months by the local churches will help open the door for additional spiritual conversation as people search for hope.

“Those areas hardest hit, we call it hard soil,” Tioco says. “Eventually, after all the rebuilding is done, the churches can get some credibility and be able to impart the true Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ to those that are truly in need.”

How to Pray

Tioco has asked for three specific prayer requests for central Philippines:

- For those who lost loved ones: “It definitely is going to be traumatic for most of them. Newspapers are calling these people ‘zombies,’ just walking down the middle of the street. Don’t know where they’re going.”
- Safety for all relief teams traveling: “Security forces are not functioning. Out of 300 policemen in the city, only 20 reported for duty. Government is declaring martial law in those areas.”
- More support to help those in need: “This is by far the worst disaster in Philippines’ history. It will take months to gather what actually transpired.”

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