

## **Philippines: An appeal to help flood victims and improve public warning systems**

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The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) express its sincere condolences to the Filipino people for the terrible loss of life caused by typhoon Ondoy (international name Ketsana) that affected Metro Manila and nearby provinces on Saturday, 26 September 2009. The displacement of people and families, the destruction of their livelihoods, properties and homes has brought untold suffering to the affected people. However, the Filipino people have once again demonstrated their resolute will to survive in adversity amidst a calamity that caught the government flat-footed.

In the aftermath of the typhoon, which left 83 persons dead, 32 people remain missing and over 300,000 were displaced. The fortunate ones are now in evacuation centres. However, while many have been rescued a number of persons have not been reached by the teams of rescue workers. There are also other villagers who opted to stay on the rooftop of their houses, wanting only food, clothes and drinking water instead of going with the rescue workers. One reason given is the lack of security in the affected areas which leaves their homes and property vulnerable to looting.

The nine-hour downpour has submerged about 80 per cent of Metro Manila, the heaviest in the country's 40-year rainfall record and disrupted power supply lines. Riverbanks overflowed which rendered even the government disaster response teams, along with their equipment, helpless against the magnitude of the calamity. Even the rescue workers themselves were trapped at the rooftops of their own houses and could not mobilize due to the shortage of the most basic rescue equipment such as rubber boats. The 10 to 20 feet deep flood waters dumped by the typhoon brought most rescue efforts to a standstill.

The AHRC, while offering condolences to the victims and the displaced, also expresses its disappointment with the government over its lack of a sufficient public warning system that could have reduced the impact of the damage by having the would-be affected areas better informed as to what to expect. Typhoons and severe tropical storms are not unknown in the Philippines as several of them make direct hits on the island of Luzon every year. Despite this, the country's public warning system and its dissemination of information regarding the possible extent of calamities have not been developed.

For example, the [5am](#) and [5pm](#) advisories on September 26 dispatched by the Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pag-Asa), a government agency responsible for issuing public warnings and hoisting storm signals, did not contain information as to what precautions the people should take or the extent of flooding they should expect. They did issue a storm signal but failed to issue adequate warnings or advisories as to the severity of the downpour and possibility of flooding.

The government's failure has actually resulted in rescue workers and their equipment being rendered helpless. In turn, people who are supposed to have been urgently rescued have had to wait for several hours under heavy rain, thirsty and starving on their rooftops.

When the power supply failed later that day it likewise aggravated the dissemination of more accurate information, advisories and warnings. The people, who largely depend on radio and television announcements were thrown into chaos not knowing what was happening around them.

The response of the government—according to victim observations—came only after the heavy downpour had subsided. In fact, a local television aired a video wherein a top government official was seen [waving his hands](#) while onboard a helicopter, to promote his 'aerial inspection' as they hovered over

the affected areas instead of lifting people to safety.

The AHRC urges the government of the Philippines to learn from this tragedy and make every effort to drastically improve its storm warning system. There is no doubt that neighboring governments, particularly that of Hong Kong, would be willing and able to offer any assistance required in this respect.

The AHRC is encouraging those who want to make donations of money or relief goods to contact directly the organization listed below.

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