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Desperate Philippine typhoon survivors loot, dig up water pipes

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By [Andrew R.C. Marshall](#) and [Stuart Grudgings](#)

TACLOBAN, Philippines (Reuters) - Desperation gripped Philippine islands devastated by Typhoon Haiyan as looting turned deadly on Wednesday and survivors panicked over shortages of food, water and medicine, some digging up underground water pipes and smashing them open.

Five days after one of the strongest storms ever recorded slammed into cities and towns in the central Philippines, anger and frustration boiled over on Wednesday as essential supplies dwindled. Some survivors scrawled signs reading "Help us".

Controversy also emerged over the death toll. President Benigno Aquino said local officials had overstated the loss of life, saying it was closer to 2,000 or 2,500 than the 10,000 previously estimated. His comments, however, drew skepticism from some aid workers.

Some areas appeared to teeter near anarchy amid widespread looting of shops and warehouses for food, water and supplies.

There were reports of gunfire between security forces and armed men near a mass grave in worst-hit Tacloban in Leyte province, but city administrator Tecson John Lim denied the clash based on information he had received from the army.

Eight people were crushed to death when looters raided rice stockpiles in a government warehouse in the town of Alangalang, causing a wall to collapse, local authorities said.

Other looters still managed to cart away 33,000 bags of rice weighing 50 kg (110 lb) each, said Orlan Calayag, administrator of the state-run grain agency National Food Authority.

Warehouses owned by food and drinks company Universal Robina Corp and drug company United Laboratories were ransacked in the storm-hit town of Palo in Leyte, along with a rice mill in Jaro, said Alfred Li, head of the Leyte Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Tacloban city administrator Tecson John Lim said 90 percent of the coastal city of 220,000 people had been destroyed, with only 20 percent of residents receiving aid. Houses were now being looted because warehouses were empty, he said.

"The looting is not criminality. It is self-preservation," Lim told Reuters.

Some survivors in Tacloban dug up water pipes in their desperate need for water.

"We don't know if it's safe. We need to boil it. But at least we have something," said Christopher Dorano, 38.

"There have been a lot of people who have died here."

Resident Rachel Garduce said the aid - 3 kg (6 lb) of rice and 1 liter (34 ounces) of water per household a day - was not enough in her ravaged Tacloban neighborhood. Her aunt in Manila, 580 km (360 miles) to the north, was travelling by road and ferry to bring supplies. "We are hoping she won't get hijacked," she said.

Secretary Mar Roxas denied law and order were breaking down. "It is wrong to say there is lawlessness in the city," he told reporters.

THOUSANDS REPORTED MISSING

The government has been overwhelmed by the force of the typhoon, which destroyed large swathes of Leyte province where local officials have said they feared 10,000 people died, many drowning in a tsunami-like surge of seawater.

Aquino, who has been on the defensive over his handling of the disaster, said the government was still gathering information from various storm-struck areas and the death toll may rise. "Ten thousand, I think, is too much," Aquino told CNN in an interview. "There was emotional drama involved with that particular estimate.

Official confirmed deaths stood at 2,275 on Wednesday, with only 84 missing, a figure aid workers consider off the mark.

"At this time it is definitely not 10,000," Cabinet Secretary Rene Almendras told a news conference. "There has been a



body count based on the dead lying in the streets but we can't be accurate because there is still, some people say, there are people buried in certain areas."

Some aid workers cast doubt over Aquino's estimate.

"Probably it will be higher because numbers are just coming in. Many of the areas we cannot access," Gwendolyn Pang, secretary general of the Philippine Red Cross, told Reuters.

The preliminary number of missing, according to the Red Cross, is 22,000. Pang cautioned that figure could include people who have since been located.

Google, which has set up websites to help people share and look for information about missing persons during catastrophes, currently lists some 65,500 people as missing from the typhoon. The Person Finder website allows anyone to list a person missing and to search the database for names.

But Google staff warned against reading too much into the data, pointing out that a similar website set up after the Japanese tsunami in 2011 listed more than 600,000 names, far higher than the final death toll of nearly 20,000.

CHAOTIC EVACUATION

There are not enough flights from Tacloban airport to cope with the exodus from this stricken town. As darkness fell on Wednesday, Philippine Special Forces held back hundreds of people, many of whom had walked for hours to reach the airport and then waited for days with little or no food or water.

When asked how she and her four children endured three days of waiting in searing heat and torrential downpours, Marivic Badilla, 41, held up a small battered umbrella. "We have been sheltering under this," she said, tears streaming down her face.

Many people complained that military families were given priority to board the C-130 cargo planes out of Tacloban. "If you have a friend or relative in the military, you get priority," said Violeta Duzar, 57, who had waited at the airport since Sunday with eight family members, including children.

"They say 'Fall in line! Fall in line!' and we all line up. Then nothing happens," she said of the soldiers presiding over chaotic scenes.

None of the aid passing through the airport had been distributed to the needy crowd at its gates.

Firming the resolve of those at the airport to get on a flight out are reports and rumors of looting and rape in the ruined city.

"It's the criminals who escaped from the prison. They're raping the women," said Duzar. "Tacloban is a dead city."

Tacloban city administrator Lim said that "less than ten" prisoners escaped from jail after the typhoon struck.

More than 670,000 people have been displaced by the storm and nearly 12 percent of the population directly affected, the United Nations said.

The World Health Organization said teams from Belgium, Japan, Israel and Norway had arrived in the Philippines to set up field hospitals.

The nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS George Washington will arrive later this week, carrying about 5,000 sailors and more than 80 aircraft. It has been joined by four other U.S. Navy ships.

The United States, a close ally and former colonial ruler of the Philippines, has also provided eight C-130 cargo planes for delivering aid, said Cabinet Secretary Almendras.

Rescuers have reached some previously cut off regions, such as Guiuan, a wind-swept city of 40,000 people that was spared the storm surge that washed over Tacloban. Local officials say 85 people were killed in Guiuan, with 24 missing.

The typhoon also leveled Basey, a seaside town in Samar province about 10 km (6 miles) across a bay from Tacloban. Local officials say 80 people were killed there.

The overall financial cost of the destruction was hard to assess. Initial estimates varied widely, with a report from German-based CEDIM Forensic Disaster Analysis putting the total at \$8 billion to \$19 billion.

(Additional reporting by Rosemarie Francisco in Manila, Jeremy Wagstaff in Singapore and Phil Stewart and Susan Heavey in Washington. Writing by Jason Szep. Editing by Dean Yates and Nick Macfie)

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