

Humanitarian assistance continues in Northern Philippines still reeling from weeks of heavy rain

On October 9, a devastating flood buried dozens of towns and villages under a thick layer of mud and killed hundreds of people in the province of Benguet, northern Philippines. The mudslides were the latest disasters brought by weeks of continuous rain in the region and two back-to-back typhoons (on September 26, and October 3). Meanwhile in the provinces of Pangasinan and Tarlac, water released from local dams triggered more floods which affected tens of thousands of people.

As the water begins to recede and the roads are cleared, people are starting to pick up their lives. But many find themselves destitute and the extent of the damage remains huge. Médecins Sans Frontières is providing medical assistance and relief items to victims in the most affected areas in Pangasinan and Tarlac provinces and is assessing needs in Benguet.

Sitting in a plastic chair in front of a pile of rubble, 63-year old Ernesto Ruperto shakes his head in disbelief. "This mud is all what's left of my house. I've lost everything - my house, my animals. I only have the clothes I was wearing when it happened," he says pointing at some debris.

All around him, the street is littered with mud-sodden clothes, broken furniture, mangled toys, and scraps of wood and corrugated iron. Houses have been shifted, roofs have collapsed and the scene of devastation could easily be mistaken for the aftermath of an earthquake.

In Rosales, Pangasinan Province, the impact of weeks of heavy rain are being felt long after typhoon Parma (also called "Pepeng" locally) made landfall on October 3, in Cagayan Province on the island of Luzon. More than 30 cities in Pangasinan were affected, forcing 50,000 to leave their homes, according to the authorities.

Part of the city of Rosales has been razed to the ground by a devastating flood after the authorities were forced to release water from several dams to prevent spillovers or collapse. More than a week after the catastrophe, victims are still coming to terms with the extent of the damage.

"The water came in the evening and rose up to 10 feet, it was terrifying. I had never seen anything like this. The current was very strong. I don't think I would have made it if my son hadn't come to my rescue," Ruperto explains. Like many victims in Rosales, he is shocked by the catastrophe: "Now that the water has just begun to go down, I'd like to clean up and rebuild but I've lost everything. We need more help."

As the water recedes, people have started leaving evacuation centres in the hope of rebuilding their houses. But because many roads were blocked, delivering humanitarian assistance has been difficult and in some areas people have still received very little assistance.

MSF, has been providing medical assistance and over 9250 non-food item kits, including buckets, soap, kitchen utensils and construction kits, in the worst affected areas of Pangasinan.

"Over two weeks after the latest typhoon, people are still badly affected. It is important that the assistance for the northern Philippines doesn't dry up because there are still significant needs for reconstruction. People here have not only lost their houses, they've lost their income, as many paddy fields have been flooded," says MSF field coordinator Voitek Asztabski.

MSF medical teams are also running mobile clinics in villages and evacuation centres and have conducted around 1,294 consultations in the area. "People have spent a long time in the water and the main ailments we see are upper respiratory tract infections, common colds, rashes, and skin and fungal infections. There are also some minor injuries, due to the fact that some of them were hurt by debris or injured when they clung to their roofs," explains Doctor Etaferahu Eshetu, "but the situation is under control and we will continue to monitor any increase in diarrhoea cases."

In Manila and its surrounding areas, MSF teams are still working to provide medical care and distribution of Non-food items to the most vulnerable people affected by tropical storm Ketsana. which struck the Philippines three weeks ago affecting 3.9 million people and forcing 500,000 to flee their houses. .