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Church agencies rush aid to thousands of Philippine flood victims

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By Catholic News Service

CAGAYAN DE ORO, Philippines (CNS) -- Church agencies teamed with international aid groups and the Philippine government to assist tens of thousands of people left homeless in northern Mindanao by flash flooding caused by an intense tropical storm that left at least 650 people dead and hundreds more missing.

The country's National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council reported that about 135,000 people in 13 provinces were affected by Tropical Storm Washi, which unleashed floods and landslides as people slept in their homes across northern Mindanao late Dec. 16.

Casualty figures from the Philippine Red Cross Dec. 19 put the death toll at 652. But with another 808 people missing, that toll is expected to rise, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

Church sources in Cagayan de Oro and Iligan, two of the worst hit areas, say exact casualty figures are difficult to pin down because of the extensive damage caused by the storm.

Joe Curry, country representative for Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, told Catholic News Service Dec. 19 from Cagayan de Oro, a city of about 600,000, that about 35,000 people who lost their homes are being housed in evacuation centers in schools and outdoor covered gymnasiums

Overall, an estimated 75,000 of the city's residents living near a river that flows down from nearby mountains on its way to the ocean were affected by the flooding, he said.

"It looks kind of like the tsunami hitting," he said describing what he saw when he arrived in the low-lying area at the base of a mountain. "Everything was taken off the foundations. The water was 11 feet above its banks, and anything near it was wiped away."

Curry described survivors as stunned.

"People in the evacuation centers we've met have nothing left from their houses," he said. "Everything went with the house. They have no clothes. They have no kitchen items. They have nothing."

CRS, which sent a team of eight workers form Davao City, and other aid agencies met at the residence of Archbishop Antonio Ledesma of Cagayan de Oro, just outside the flood zone Dec. 19 to coordinate their response with the government. The representatives planned to meet every two days to report on their work and update their plan.

Curry said about 80 percent of the city is without water because water washed away the main water line through the city.

Beryl Tranco of the Panday Bulig Relief and Rehabilitation Center told UCA News that providing water to the city is the biggest challenge facing relief workers.

"Our priority was to distribute drinking water because there is no water, no electricity, the area smells of garbage and decaying bodies," she said.

Caritas Manila, church-run Radio Veritas and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' national social action secretariat have appealed for relief supplies, clothing and money from dioceses across the country.

In Manila, Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle directed parishes to take up collection at Masses through Christmas for survivors.

Meanwhile, words of comfort and offers of assistance poured in from around the world.

After reciting the Angelus Dec. 18 at the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI said he wanted to assure the people of the Philippines of his prayers. After the "violent tropical storm," he said, "I pray for the victims -- many of whom are children -- for the homeless and the numerous people who are missing."

Caritas Australia also announced the opening of an appeal for flood victims.

U.S. President Barack Obama offered condolences to the country and said the United States was prepared to assist in recovery efforts if needed.

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