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Nun, Haiyan survivors hand over petition to Aquino's office

N.J. Viehland | Feb. 17, 2014 NCR Today
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Benedictine Sr. Edita Eslopor and fellow survivors of Typhoon Haiyan trooped to Malacañang Palace on Monday morning to give President Benigno Aquino their petition for government relief, rehabilitation and financial assistance to survivors -- but the president was a no-show.

Eslopor is chairperson of People Surge [1], which claims 12,000 members. According to their Facebook page established Jan. 5, it is "a broad alliance of victims, organizations and individuals joined together in the common goal of helping the victims of super typhoon Yolanda."

Eslopor said she and her companions thought Aquino would meet them, but instead, an employee from the records office received her group's petition.

Three representatives were allowed to enter the Malacañang gate.

"Maybe he was afraid to face the survivors," Eslopor told member of the media [2].

Interviewed over the faith-based radio station Veritas 846 [3] just before the march, the nun said people like herself, who lost their homes and family members, were "disappointed' with the government's "negligence" of the welfare of typhoon survivors.

She said people were considering filing charges of criminal negligence against the government.

Eslopar said she was marching to Malacañang with survivors and activists to tell Aquino that remote parts of Eastern Visayas have not benefited from rehabilitation and relief aid from the government, which she said is focused on cities of Leyte and Eastern Samar.

"One hundred days after the typhoon, we do not feel any hope of recovery," she said.

She said their petition demands continuous relief operations in far-flung areas, lifting of the government's no-build-zones, consultation with residents on rehabilitation of communities, and distribution of 40,000 pesos per family (US $902).

Eslopor said the Manila march was being held simultaneously with another one in Tacloban City, where Super Typhoon Haiyan sent a tsunami-like storm surge that engulfed communities Nov 8.

Across the Philippines, at least 6,200 people have been reported dead, and 2,000 remain missing. An estimated 16 million others were displaced and depend on food handed out by government and international agencies. About 1.1 million houses were destroyed partially or completely, leaving some 4.4 million people homeless.

Philippine's Secretary of Social Welfare and Development Corazon Soliman reported [4] that 1,455 survivor families have been transferred to 60 bunkhouses built by the government in Eastern Visayas.

Of these, 222 families are in Tacloban City; 81 are in Palo, Leyte; 429 in Ormoc City; 50 in Basey, Samar; and 673 in Eastern Samar.

Her report reiterated that houses are not allowed to be built within 131 feet from the shoreline anymore. Some fisherfolk families say living too far from the sea threatens their livelihood.

Eslopor said that people who lost homes, relatives and belongings are tired of unequal distribution of aid that seems to be due to politics.

"One hundred days after Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan), we in People Surge feel the recovery efforts are super-slow -- perhaps because of sour relations among politicians there (Leyte) -- leaving survivors to suffer," Eslopor said on Veritas.

Speaking in Tagalog she said, "Perhaps the relief and other aid being given does not reach the majority of people devastated by the typhoon because politicians are at odds with each other."

She said People Surge members will press provincial and national government authorities until they feel an improvement in the way rehabilitation and reconstruction is being implemented.

The government has been criticized for focusing relief [5] and rehabilitation supplies and efforts in Palo, which is headed by an Aquino ally, while other places, including Tacloban City, stronghold of the Romualdez family of Imelda Marcos, are not given as much or any aid.

Aid reaching remote places is mostly from NGOs, international organizations [6] or church groups [7], according to People Surge.

Not all interested people from Leyte could join the Manila rally. Paz Macaray is a wage earner who works in a clinic northeast of Manila. She told *NCR* her mother and siblings in Bunauen and Marasbaras, Leyte, rely on her help.

"I am only a wage earner supporting my own family here, so after more than a month, I asked them to try to link up with government agencies giving aid in town," Macaray said.

She said it is difficult for her family, which works in the copra industry, because Haiyan knocked down most of the coconut trees [8] they were depending on. "I suggested they try some temporary livelihood activity, like selling food near the schools, but they also lack funds for this," Macaray said.

Eslopor said it is "sad" that Haiyan survivors still have to march to demand adequate treatment and aid.

The Philippines St. Scholastica's Priory [9] of her international Missionary Order of Saint Benedict of Tutzing was established in Manila in 1906. More than 160 nuns work around the country, including in the hospitals in typhoon-ravaged Samar province and Tacloban City, a college in Ormoc and community school in Tacloban.

[N.J. Viehland is *NCR*?s correspondent in Asia.]

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