Disaster Response during Super Typhoons in the Philippines

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COVID-19: coronavirus disease 2019
NOAH: Nationwide Operational Assessment of Hazard

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To the Editor,

The Philippines is located on the "Pacific Ring of Fire" and along the Pacific typhoon belt; this means that the country experiences many forms of natural disasters such as super typhoons, earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, landslides, and fire. As emphasized in a recent article published in this journal, disasters can have catastrophic impacts on society and are broadly classified into natural events, man-made incidents, or a mixture of both.[1] In a recent correspondence, the author rightfully proposed that there is a compelling need to be made "for the use of amphibious vehicles in natural as well as man-made disasters and emergencies."[2] This approach to disaster management during super typhoons is indeed applicable, even in a developing country like the Philippines.

Disasters are not new to the Philippines. The devastation of Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 spurred the Philippines to further develop its disaster management structures and resources by improving communication and institutionalizing roles and responsibilities for national and international players. As a result, more recent floods, super typhoons, and landslides have seen improved communication and coordination that mitigated impacts on lives and livelihoods. In 2021, there were 42 depressions, 22 named storms, nine typhoons, and five super typhoons. A super typhoon is equivalent of a Category 5 hurricane. The most recent super typhoon named "Noru" (local name Karding) struck the Philippines on September 25-26, 2022 and swept through Central Luzon.[3] It caused floods and damaged houses and roads, tore down power lines, and destroyed trees and crops. Noru is the eleventh tropical cyclone to enter the Philippine Area of Responsibility (PAR), with the possibility of more storms to develop before the year end this 2022.

According to the Disaster Response Operations Monitoring and Information Center (DROMIC; Quezon City, Philippines) data released on September 29, 2022, more than 714,213 people were affected in 1,768 barangays across Regions I, II, III, CALABARZON, V, and CAR. A total of 22,908 persons are currently displaced, with 11,837 taking temporary shelter in 127 evacuation centers.[4] Situation reports from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC; Quezon City, Philippines) initially report five missing, 12 casualties, and 68 injured.[5] According to the report from the Bulacan Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (PDRRMO; City of Malolos, Bulacan, Philippines), five rescuers who deployed for a rescue operation died in a flash flood in barangay Kamias in the town of San Miguel, Bulacan.[6] The rescuers, who only transferred to the boat because of a defect in their truck, were swept away by strong water current, and it was only the following morning that their bodies were found in separate areas in the village.

While not as powerful as Haiyan, Noru damaged houses, infrastructure, and livelihoods on a comparable scale. It struck as people across the Philippines were already coping with increasing poverty, high unemployment rate (2.68M unemployed Filipinos), high inflation rate (6.9% in September 2022), and a roll-back on development gains following almost three years of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. In times of disasters, the government must seek long-term solutions to the problem of disaster responses in times of super typhoons and other natural and man-made calamities. It is important to revisit the defunded program called "Project NOAH" (Nationwide Operational Assessment of Hazard), a program put up by the Department of Science and Technology (Quezon City, Philippines) during the administration of late former President Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino. Project NOAH is the Philippines' primary disaster risk reduction and management program. Under it were research projects which would help the government warn communities of hazards like flooding and landslides up to six hours in advance. Immediate needs after a

super typhoon of this scale include emergency shelter, food, water, sanitation and hygiene, evacuation support, family reconnection, health care, protection of at-risk populations, and case management. In addition to immediate response, long-term recovery needs to include the rebuilding of homes and community infrastructure, restoration of electricity and water and sanitation systems, as well as support for damaged businesses and agriculture. Such mitigation is crucial to the Philippines' economic and social recovery in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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