Disease, shortages haunt typhoon survivors

RELATIVELY FORTUNATE: Having escaped the wrath of a supertyphoon, Filipino evacuees now confront water and food shortages as well as health risks.

AFP, GUINOBATAN, PHILIPPINES
Saturday, Dec 09, 2006, Page 5

Medical aid was rushed to squalid Philippine evacuation sites yesterday amid dire warnings that poor sanitation could trigger an outbreak of disease among hundreds of mudslide survivors.

Babies and children sleep on the damp wooden floors of the elementary school turned into a temporary shelter for nearly 100 families in the township of Guinobatan in the eastern Bicol region, where entire villages were swept away by volcanic debris last week.

Yet these unfortunates are relatively lucky. When Supertyphoon Durian hit last week, it created avalanches of volcanic mud that left more than 1,300 people dead or missing.

Sixteen-year-old mother Jennifer Pamplona is struggling to breastfeed her two-week-old baby, Sofía Jane, swaddled in a soiled canvass doubling as a diaper.
"She is not eating. She has been crying and has been feverish," Pamplona said, as husband, Radji, 20, sat dazed in a corner. "She was a week old when the mudslide struck and our house was instantly gone."

Nearby, children walk in their bare feet, their faces full of grime as they await daily rations of boiled noodles and fish.

An elderly man who is visibly sick sits in one corner, just meters away from another mother and her children huddled over a piece of bread.

"Water is a huge problem, the toilets are filled to capacity and we don't have portable ones. There are so many children that are sickly now, and we can't continue to live like this," said Jun Espinas, 35, an engineer.

"The government must now start looking for relocation sites because we can't return to our village. It is gone," he said. "We are desperate for medicines and infant formula."

A disease surveillance team from the Department of Health was dispatched here to assess the situation and try to prevent an outbreak that could be fatal in these crowded communities.

They administered anti-measles and polio vaccines to children as well as gave them boosters to counter the common cold.

"There have also been rising incidences of acute respiratory infections and loose bowel movements," team leader Nancy Pastrana said. "The condition here is congested, this is a common breeding ground for diseases."

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