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Typhoon survivors facing threat of disease

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GUINOBATAN, Philippines: Medical workers rushed aid to squalid Philippine evacuation sites yesterday amid fears 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,

When super typhoon Dorian hit the region last week, it created avalanches of volcanic mud that killed more than 1,200 people and left many more homeless, their houses buried in the deluge.

Sixteen-year-old mother Jennifer Pamplona struggles to breastfeed her two-week-old baby, Sofia 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 go barefoot, their faces dirty, as they await daily rations of boiled noodles and fish.

An elderly, sick man sits in one corner, just yards away from another mother



Army engineers and volunteer rescue workers use heavy equipment in an attempt to find quarry workers who are still missing after Typhoon Dorian caused landslides in the area around Mayon Volcano, Albay province, south of Manila, yesterday



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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," he said.

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 measles and polio vaccines to children.

"There have been rising incidences of acute respiratory infections and loose bowel movements," said team leader Nancy Pastrana.

"The condition here is congested, this is a common breeding ground for diseases," she said, as she struggled to inject a vaccine into a crying three-year-old girl.

The elementary school was partially damaged when tonnes of volcanic debris cascaded down the slopes of Mayon volcano at the height of the typhoon last week, burying entire villages and leaving hundreds dead and missing.

Rehabilitation work has been excruciatingly slow, and while road networks are already open, huge delivery trucks containing relief aid have not been able to fully penetrate far-flung areas.

More than a week after the incident, bodies are still being dug from the rubble and quickly buried in mass graves not far from excavation sites.

Forensic experts have been exhuming bodies elsewhere to properly tag and identify them, while health officials have rushed to teach villagers proper ways of "managing the dead".

The World Health Organisation issued an advisory saying mass burials were not necessary at disaster sites because the corpses were unlikely to become the sources of disease outbreaks.

However many communities resorted to the burials anyway because the stench of the bodies has become too unbearable.

Electrical, communications and water services in most stricken areas still have not been restored. People have resorted to using deep wells and springs for drinking water.

Even as the survivors struggled to make do, the government weather station warned that Tropical Storm Utor was approaching the central Philippines and could affect the Bicol region.

Cedric Daep, the provincial head of disaster co-ordinating efforts, said as many as 20,000 families might have to be eventually relocated from the devastated areas.

Foreign aid continued to pour in with the arrival of a planeload of relief supplies from the US and promises of aid from around the globe.

Meanwhile, the international Red Cross said yesterday it has launched an emergency appeal for \$2.47mn to assist the 98,000 people affected by tropical storm Durian in Vietnam.

An estimated 67 people were killed after Durian made landfall in the Mekong Delta on Tuesday, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies said in a statement.

Fifty people are still missing and over 170,000 homes had their roofs ripped off by the storm.

The storm earlier left more than 1,200 people dead or missing in the Philippines, where it was classed as a typhoon.

The Vietnam Red Cross has already distributed food, blankets, mosquito nets and water containers to 2,000 families hardest hit by the disaster, but adverse weather conditions are hampering relief efforts.

"Relief is getting through to most areas, but in Quang Nam province, the mountainous districts of Nam Tra My, Bac Tra My and Phuoc Son, which are home to about 150,000 people, remain cut off by flood waters," said Tao Vandang, head of the Red Cross's disaster management operation in the country. - Agencies

