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Children Primary Victims of Ompong's Wrath- Save the Children Philippines

Hundreds of children are feared dead in the landslides in the Cordilleras and thousands more are staying in cramped evacuation centers in the aftermath of Typhoon Ompong (international name: Mangkhut) that left a swath of destruction in Northern Luzon.

Rescue workers noted the unsanitary conditions in many evacuation centers, most of them government school buildings.

Thus, in addition to being forced to stay, although temporarily, in overcrowded evacuation centers, the children are also missing out on school, Save the Children Philippines said on Monday.

Albert Muyot, the group's CEO said the needs of children should be of utmost priority in all the humanitarian efforts because they are the most vulnerable during emergencies.

"Children bear the brunt of every disaster," said Muyot. Many of them die, forcedly separated from parents, endure hunger and sickness and missing out on schools.

The group has dispatched three humanitarian teams to Isabela and Tuguegarao to assess situation and distribute thousands of emergency kits to help families attend to basic needs for food, health and hygiene.

Another humanitarian team will be dispatched to Itogon, Benguet within the week to facilitate to assess the situation of displaced families, mostly children and lactating mothers affected by landslides.

Muyot said the team looks at psychosocial interventions such as reuniting displaced children to their parents.

So far at least 69 people have been killed, while dozens are still missing.

According to the Department of Education, more than 4,300 schools remain suspended because of damage caused by the storm or the ongoing use of classrooms as evacuation centers, affecting just over one million students. At least 170 schools suffered flooding, while nearly 2,000 classrooms were either totally destroyed or suffered varying levels of damage.

"We're really concerned about the long-term impact of the typhoon on children, particularly those who aren't able to go back to school. Hundreds of classrooms have been totally destroyed. Some had roofs ripped from their

foundations while others were crushed by falling trees,” Save the Children’s Jerome Balinton said from Tuguegarao City in northern Luzon.

“It will be a huge task to clear the rubble and repair or rebuild classrooms, not to mention replacing damaged tables and chairs, and learning materials that perished in the storm.”

The Government of the Philippines is leading the humanitarian response and working with aid agencies to meet the needs of affected communities. The government also led large-scale evacuations prior to the typhoon making landfall, which undoubtedly saved lives.

Mr. Balinton said it was crucial that aid agencies and government departments included education among their top priorities in the humanitarian response.

“Sadly we know that the longer a child is out of school, the less likely it is that they’ll ever go back. This means that alongside the provision of life-saving food, shelter and medical support, it’s vital that there is a strong focus on getting children back to the classroom as quickly as possible,” he said.

“Not only is it critical for children’s future learning, but school also provides a sense of routine and comfort in times of disaster. It’s a safe space for students, and somewhere they can be with their friends and forget about the frightening ordeal they have been through.

Large swathes of farmland have also been destroyed, leaving thousands of farmers – often among the poorest members of society in the Philippines – in financial peril. Half the population in typhoon affected areas rely on agriculture for a living. This also comes at a time when the nation is already coping with rice shortages and its highest inflation levels since 2009.

“It is critical that support is also provided to those who lost their livelihoods, particularly those relying on agriculture for a living. Farmers we spoke to lost their entire crops of corn and rice, which were due for harvest in about two months,” Mr Balinton said.

“This can create a spiral of debt as farmers, often already having borrowed money to buy seeds and other expenses, are forced to borrow more to make up for crop loss and be able to feed their families. Sometimes in these situations we see parents taking their children out of school because they can no longer afford the tuition fees, or so the children can work to support their family.”

Save the Children will begin distributing aid to 800 of the worst-affected families tomorrow, including hygiene items like shampoo, soap and cleaning products, as well as jerry cans, water purification tablets, pots and pans for cooking and plastic sheeting for temporary shelter.

The aid agency’s response will also include helping children get back to school quickly, as well as providing livelihood support to farmers who suffered major crop loss.

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