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No. 211/2013 dated 15 November 2013

Typhoon Haiyan's Aftermath: Testing Resilience in Complex Emergencies

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Synopsis

No one could have anticipated the devastating impact of super typhoon Haiyan that hit central Philippines a week ago. The country faces the herculean task of providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief on an unprecedented scale. National authorities need to examine what has gone wrong to address the complex humanitarian challenges facing the survivors.

Commentary

THE DEVASTATING aftermath of super typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines is not just of catastrophic proportions but also a complex humanitarian emergency. No government could have anticipated and prepared for the destruction caused by the strongest typhoon in recent history - with massive losses to critical infrastructure, huge population displacement and casualties.

The Philippine government is simply overwhelmed by the herculean task of undertaking search and rescue operations and providing immediate humanitarian relief and assistance to typhoon victims in the scattered islands. The challenge is proving to be beyond the capacity of local and national officials. Indeed, the day after the typhoon flattened the city of Tacloban, the worst affected area in the country, it emerged that their first responders – the local authorities - were themselves victims of the disaster.

Weak capacity exposed

Given the void at the local level, national authorities were forced to step in. But there appears so far to be no clear chain of command to coordinate relief efforts by various government agencies and other humanitarian groups, both foreign and local.

Almost a week after Haiyan devastated cities and towns in the central Philippines, President Benigno Aquino's administration is under tremendous pressure to step up the sluggish pace of relief operations. Pressure is also mounting to expedite the distribution of food, water and medicines to hundreds of thousands of homeless typhoon survivors. Desperate survivors and media have criticised the apparent "disorganised" relief operations taking place in devastated provinces.

Who is in charge?

With the massive outpouring of domestic and international emergency relief, the government needs to immediately scale up its effort by establishing a clearly defined chain of command to oversee and coordinate the disaster operations. It is also critical that information about all foreign financial assistance received, which now stands at US\$93 million, and how these are being spent be conducted in a transparent manner to avoid waste and corruption.

The UN Commissioner for Humanitarian Assistance has visited the typhoon-hit region to oversee international relief efforts. However, a well-established chain of command can expedite the implementation of crucial post-disaster operations, which include, among others (1) uninterrupted delivery of relief goods; (2) collection of dead bodies; (3) evacuation of survivors from flattened communities; (4) restoration of law and order; and (5) resettlement and rehabilitation of displaced communities.

Attending to post-disaster emergencies

Providing basic necessities

One of the priorities that has to be addressed in complex relief operations is securing the basic welfare of the millions of survivors. The lack of food, water, sanitation and shelter for many of them can spell a health crisis that can spiral out of control. The risks of infectious diseases are great given the high incidence of diarrhoea, respiratory illnesses, leptospirosis and influenza outbreaks especially among the injured. With most hospitals damaged, tending to the thousands that are injured and sick also poses critical challenges to fight the outbreak of diseases like tetanus infections.

So far, about 360,000 displaced people are cramped together in some 1,100 evacuation centres. Aside from the physical needs of the people, there is also the difficulty of tending to the psychological trauma of the survivors who had to face the tragic loss of family members and ruined properties.

Restoring law and order

Hunger and desperation can lead to a breakdown in law and order. Looting, theft and violence can endanger the lives of the displaced people, as well as those from the aid agencies and other humanitarian organisations. Providing for the security of affected communities is therefore another major challenge that needs to be addressed.

Rebuilding what was lost

Reconstruction and rehabilitation is one of the most challenging tasks ahead for the Philippine government. The government is already hampered by the damage from an earthquake that levelled some towns and displaced communities in October 2013. The destruction brought by Haiyan severely added to the brunt of relocating communities to safe and liveable areas and the rebuilding about 250,000 homes for displaced families.

With more than US\$8.4 million in assessed damage to infrastructure and properties, and an estimated US\$82 million cost to agriculture in the affected regions, the impact of Haiyan on the Philippine economy cannot be understated. While it takes time, it is important that whatever critical infrastructure that has to be rebuilt should be reinforced and made more disaster-proof. Ensuring that the rebuilt communities are more disaster-resilient has to be a priority of the government.

Advancing humanitarianism and international cooperation

In the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Haiyan, international aid from 40 foreign governments and organisations has begun flowing into the Philippines. Indeed, international response has been quick and generous. The United States is sending US\$20 million in immediate relief and a huge military contingent; Britain is offering US\$32 million worth of aid and sending a helicopter carrier; while Japan is donating US\$10 million in aid with a team of doctors.

Meanwhile, it has been observed that China's initial response has been less forthcoming. After some criticisms, China increased its earlier pledge of US\$200,000 to US\$1.7 million in aid to Manila, but still noticeably far less than the pledges made by other governments. Beijing's response to the Philippines' crisis has been read by some as a consequence of its contentious relations with Manila arising from the South China Sea disputes and the 2010 Manila hostage crisis that killed eight Hong Kong tourists.

However, China's apparent initial hesitance in responding to the crisis could raise doubts about its pledge last month to deepen cooperation with ASEAN in wide-ranging areas including disaster relief when President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang visited the region. In times of complex humanitarian disasters, might

humanitarianism trump geopolitics in support of the affected communities?

As affected communities begin the long-road to rebuild their lives amidst massive dislocation and devastation, all available resources must be provided to help these people pick themselves up and move forward. As the disaster-weary country comes together in the face of such tragedy, there is no guarantee that disasters will not happen again. The support and cooperation of the international community in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief is therefore crucial to help communities weather extreme events like super typhoon Haiyan.

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