

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical issues and contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg for feedback to the Editor RSIS Commentary, Yang Razali Kassim.

Lessons of Two Disasters: Building Resilience from Within

By Mely Caballero-Anthony and Julius Cesar I. Trajano

Synopsis

The onslaught of super typhoon Hagupit has once again raised fears of massive destruction and high casualties in the Philippines. Being prepared helps mitigate the impact of destructive typhoons.

Commentary

FOR THE communities in central Philippines, a repeat of 2013's onslaught of super typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda) raised, once again, fears of devastation and loss of lives with the arrival of Typhoon Hagupit.

The strongest typhoon to hit the country this year, Hagupit barrelled through central Philippines, where thousands were killed by super typhoon Haiyan last year. At less than 200 kilometres per hour (kph), though far weaker than Haiyan which had a strength of more than 300 kph, slow-moving Hagupit was projected to hammer cities, towns and impoverished coastal communities, which were still recovering from the devastation wrought by Haiyan.

Devastation redux

The region experienced heavy rain and intense winds, but few injuries and little damage had been reported so far. At least 27 people have been reported killed, according to the Red Cross, although exact casualty figures are likely to rise as more deaths are uncovered. Still, it did not appear to have wreaked devastation on the same scale as last year's deadly Haiyan.

During the onslaught of Haiyan last year, tsunami-like storm surges flattened what used to be vibrant towns and communities, killed or left missing close to 8,000 people, and displaced as many as four million. In Tacloban City, which was the ground zero for Haiyan, the city's response to another disaster was again tested. And this time, the city suffered no casualties after Hagupit made landfall, thanks to early massive forced evacuation of 49,000 inhabitants.

Local governments in Samar and Leyte provinces declared their typhoon preparedness a "success" as there were no massive casualties during the onslaught of Hagupit. In terms of economic cost, while the damage to infrastructure and agriculture is yet to be assessed by the government, it is unlikely

that Hagupit will be as destructive as Haiyan which caused approximately US\$700 million worth of damage to infrastructure and agriculture. It obliterated more than half a million homes and destroyed the local communities' sources of agriculturally based livelihood.

Preparedness matters

After the 2013 'fiasco', the Philippine government pulled out all stops to prepare for imminent typhoon. Hagupit was seen as the ultimate test of President Benigno Aquino's post-Haiyan disaster preparedness mechanism - a year after his administration was criticised for its messy response to Haiyan's devastation. President Aquino himself, in a pre-Hagupit disaster meeting, pressured his cabinet ministers to ensure minimum casualties. By initial accounts, his administration seems to have passed the test.

Prior to Hagupit's onslaught, the Philippines implemented one of its largest-ever peacetime evacuations. More than one million people have been evacuated and placed in 81 evacuation centres. Some private properties, including hotels and even houses of local politicians, were likewise opened to host evacuees. The government's disaster response equipment, emergency workers and relief aid items were also prepositioned to ensure prompt post-typhoon relief assistance.

Another post-Haiyan innovative measure of the government was the regular issuance, through mainstream and social media, of storm surge warnings, which were used by local governments to identify disaster-prone communities and kept affected residents informed. Also, local governments - as first responders - seem to be more prepared in protecting their communities, through enforced evacuation.

During Haiyan last year, affected local governments were virtually incapacitated to immediately respond to the needs of their communities and uphold peace and order. But this time, local police and military personnel were strategically deployed to prevent looting, a common occurrence in the aftermath of Haiyan as desperate residents received no relief supplies.

Disaster-relief initiatives from the international community also appear to be more coordinated and, evidently, less political. It must be noted that in the course of massive international relief efforts last year, China was heavily criticised for its delayed and paltry contribution to the relief efforts due to, arguably, its lingering territorial disputes with the Philippines in the South China Sea.

This time, China is among the first 11 countries to pledge relief and rehabilitation assistance, along with the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the Philippines' ASEAN neighbours Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Brunei.

Lessons learnt: Regional response

Indeed, one important lesson in this episode is that a regional disaster mechanism can now be easily activated to complement the relief assistance of the international community. A six-man ASEAN Emergency Rapid Assessment Team (ERAT), which included four Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) officers, was deployed prior to the onslaught of Hagupit.

The team comes under the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance (AHA). Its critical function is to provide rapid assessment and determine the critical resources - such as tents, medical kits, and sanitation facilities - required for the areas affected by the typhoon. ERAT helps ASEAN and the international community identify what needs to be delivered to affected communities.

Working with the AHA, Singapore has also deployed its Swift Emergency Evaluation Deployment (SEED) team, a nationally-organised needs assessment team to assist the Philippines in getting a comprehensive analysis of the situation in the affected areas and enhance information-sharing. This helps facilitate decision-making by armed forces, for instance, by directing them to affected areas most in need of disaster assistance.

Engaging local communities

Another key takeaway in the aftermath of Hagupit is the importance of getting communities involved

to boost community resilience. While both local and national governments prepared themselves to protect communities, the people had already inculcated the habit of cooperating with authorities in the massive evacuation efforts.

Local governments credited the cooperation of communities to ensure quick and orderly evacuation which undeniably saved thousands of lives. People are also now more informed of the possible deadly consequences of Hagupit should they refuse to heed authorities.

Indeed, natural disasters are now regarded as a major security threat affecting communities regionally. Powerful typhoons such as Haiyan and Hagupit are no longer just one-off events, but yearly occurrences due to worsening climate change. As this kind of disasters affect millions of lives irrespective of political boundaries, it is essential to assist communities to be more disaster-resilient, primarily through coordinated efforts of national and multilateral actors.

Mely Caballero-Anthony and Julius Cesar I. Trajano are respectively Head and Senior Analyst with the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg