

PHILIPPINES

Large tracts of the Philippines were devastated in May by a typhoon and tidal wave. As can be seen from the following article by Mr. J. M. Goudstikker, the Philippine National Red Cross immediately went into action, providing emergency aid to hundreds of thousands of victims.

The Philippine National Red Cross has 79 branches and a permanent staff of 500 throughout the Philippines, in all provinces and towns. Its activities extend to the tiniest hamlet and to all the mountain tribes so often cut off from the rest of the country for several months of the year. When Typhoon Olga and its attendant rains and floods hit the Philippine Islands between 18 and 27 May 1976, the National Red Cross Society mobilised all its resources and staff to provide emergency help to all those affected.

Hundreds of young volunteers also lent a hand for several days at a time to get essential foods and medicines by amphibians or army helicopters to communities increasingly cut off by rising floods and sorely tried by strong winds, turbulent rivers devastating everything in their path, and lack of electricity, food and blankets. This difficult situation lasted a week. The Government of the Philippines and the Philippine National Red Cross made an all-out attack on it through the National Disaster Coordinator Committee (NDCC) formed after the 1972 floods.

The main problem of the NDCC assistance operation was to get sufficient food and medical aid to completely isolated towns and villages, and sometimes also to evacuate persons marooned on a few square yards of slightly raised ground. Bulacan, Pampanga, Tarlac, Pangasinan, Nueva Ecija and Cavite Provinces, and the entire metropolitan area of Manila, were for several days under water which, from the second and third day of rain onwards, was over nine feet deep. The region is normally a vast plain which is the national "rice granary". Seen from the air it looked like an immense artificial lake on whose muddy waters drifted the wreckage of houses and bridges, even the bodies of drowned persons.

It took several days to reach some villages, and getting supplies to the inhabitants was not without its dangers, even by helicopter. The propeller blades produced strong air currents which could cause people who had taken refuge on roofs to fall into the water, and sacks of rice dropped from the helicopter could be carried away by the current or hit a sharp ridge and burst. In spite of all these unavoidable difficulties thousands of people have been helped or evacuated. The Philippine National Red Cross, which was called on to distribute food in over one hundred evacuation centres throughout the country, soon set about buying where it could—partly from government sources—the sacks of rice which were transported by Army helicopters. After a week's rain the storm abated and the floods began to subside.

Three days later—about 31 May—the principal highway to the North over the flooded plain was re-opened to traffic and Philippine National Red Cross lorries could start resupplying the local branches, many of which had come to the end of their resources and stocks. The Philippine Red Cross appeal to the League of Red Cross Societies on 26 May gave good grounds for hoping for the speedy arrival of essential aid from abroad, and this put heart into first aiders exhausted by the constant demands made on them and difficulties in buying food. . .

On 31 May the Philippine Red Cross announced that it had assisted nearly 479,000 persons at some time or other during the previous twelve days—an impressive achievement, taking into account the difficulties involved. Much remained to be done; thousands of people in Manila and elsewhere whose homes had been swept away by floods at the height of the storm were in evacuation centres, and flooded roads and destroyed bridges were still preventing help from reaching large communities. Three weeks after the disaster, some villages could only be reached by boat and some isolated houses were supplied by volunteers on foot and carrying sacks weighing a hundredweight for one or two kilometres across the ricefields over which little plank bridges are laid.

Medical problems are the same as ever, gastro-enteritis and dressing of wounds infected by dirty water. Two teams of twenty-five persons each, comprising a doctor and Red Cross nurses, were formed a few days after the typhoon began and toured evacuation centres in the capital before going on to the provinces.

The Philippine Red Cross considered prolonging its emergency assistance throughout the month of June. At least eight hundred thousand people have thus received assistance. . .