

Super Typhoon Durian (Reming): U.S. Government Assistance to Albay, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Amid 60 years of economic, social, and political excitement, the United States and the Philippines have maintained an enduring friendship. This relationship has stood the test of time, with both nations unabatedly providing mutual assistance toward the common good.

The Republic of the Philippines is an archipelago of 7,107 islands with a total land area of 298,170 square kilometers inhabited by 89 million people (2006 estimates). It is comprised of 13 regions, 79 provinces, and 1,610 municipalities. One of the regions, Bicol, contains 6 provinces (Catanduanes, Albay, Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur, Masbate, and Sorsogon). It is a peninsula of 4.7 million people at the southern most portion of Luzon Island. Among Bicol's six provinces, Albay has the largest population distribution, 1.09 million residents. With a land area of 255,257 hectares, agriculture accounts for the largest portion of the province's total economic output and source of employment. Albay's major crops are coconuts, rice, abaca, and corn. Albeit its cities and towns display modern commercial structures, an overwhelming majority of the population still lives in dwellings made from a combination of native materials such as bamboo, lumber, palm leaves, and coconut; rendering them vulnerable to strong winds brought about by typhoons. Albay is characterized by the imposing presence of an 8,000-foot Mount Mayon, the country's most active volcano. The majority of the province's 15 municipalities and 3 cities are situated on its slopes.

THE SUPER TYPHOON

In the morning of November 30, 2006, Super Typhoon Durian (locally known as Reming) struck the central Philippines. With Durian's winds recorded at speeds of up to 248 kilometers per hour, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services (PAGASA) issued its highest warning level of Public Storm Signal 4 over the Bicol Region, particularly Catanduanes, Albay, Camarines Norte and Camarines Sur. The typhoon's eye passed over Albay province, bringing up to 460mm (18 inches) of rain, much of it on the slopes of Mount Mayon. The volcano still contained millions of cubic feet of volcanic debris from a recent eruption. Inundated with rain, deposits of ash, sand, and boulders as big as automobiles, Mount Mayon released mudflows that cascaded from its slopes into surrounding towns with enormous velocity; destroying everything within the flows' paths, entombing settlements, farmlands, livestock, and people. The intensity of rainfall and contributing terrain features caused widespread flashfloods, making Albay the most devastated province in the region in terms of destruction to infrastructure, livelihood, and human life.

RESPONSE

The United States dispatched personnel and emergency aid to Albay through its Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Defense, and World Vision (its non-governmental organization partner). The United States Army Medical Component – Armed Forces Research Institute for Medical Sciences (USAMC-AFRIMS) sent CPT Michael Charles A. Van Hoven who was born and raised in Banao, Guinobatan, Albay and was a veteran of the 1987 Super Typhoon Sisang.

Under the direction of the Albay Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council, specific barangays in the municipalities of Malilipot, Santo Domingo, and Bacacay were assigned to World Vision. From December 8th to the 22nd, World Vision and elements of the Philippines Armed Forces distributed a blanket, a sleeping mat, a mosquito net, a lantern, a flashlight, 25 kilos of rice, cooking oil, dried fish, beans, a box of cookies, a cooking pot, and a 10-liter container of mineral water to each family.

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Galvanized iron sheets, and the “Food and Cash-for-Work Program” were later introduced to help rebuild homes and support government rehabilitation efforts.

CONCLUSION

In Albay, typhoons are an unpleasant fact. Located along the typhoon belt, the province has a yearly average of 20 typhoons. Generations of Albayanos have endured one of nature’s wraths, but November 30, 2006 was different. A level 4 Super Typhoon, never before experienced in the province, left behind a terrified population and a paralyzed economy. Early recognition of the disaster and acknowledgment of the potential crisis, by local officials and the national government, resulted in the rapid mobilization of rescue efforts, relief operations and international support; ultimately averting a looming humanitarian disaster. The Albay Provincial Disaster Coordinating Council’s extensive experience made a significant impact on effectively coordinating various agencies, ensuring the efficient delivery of services to affected areas.

US Government assistance benefited over 20,000 people. CPT Van Hoven provided emergency food items to members of his village, organized volunteers to augment World Vision, and assisted members of the United States Marine Expeditionary Brigade’s assessment team from Okinawa.

The people of Albay are grieving; many will mourn for years to come, but their inherent resilience will, once again, pave the way to recovery.

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