



November 19, 2013

Dear Friends,

A few people have asked about the terrible typhoon that roared through the Philippines about a week ago. We were not affected in Manila, and all of our staff in the central part of the Philippines where the typhoon passed through were also spared. But that can't be said for many of those who are visually impaired that we work with in those areas.

These typhoons that come hurtling up out of the South Pacific with the Philippines dead in their sights are certainly not unexpected. This latest one, with the international name Typhoon Haiyan and named Yolanda in the Philippines, is about the twentieth typhoon to hit us this year. But Yolanda took the country by surprise, with a storm surge that almost defies the imagination. The effect was very similar to a tsunami, with the added force of 200 mph winds. There was no chance for the typical Philippine dwelling to withstand that kind of raw power. If you have seen any of the pictures, you have to wonder why there weren't many more casualties than what is being reported.

At RBI we immediately got together and mapped out all the blind children and school programs that lay in the path of the storm as it crossed over the Philippines. It added up to about 350 blind children in about 90 school programs that were possibly affected. We have already started to visit some of the areas and have been able to make contact with a few of the families and teachers. We know of about 20 families so far whose homes had major damage or were swept away. Some of the schools were also damaged, and 5 or 6 teachers lost their homes. One school principal lost one of her children. These numbers will surely grow.

There are still 54 communities and school programs that we are trying to contact. Most of these are in the worst devastated areas where there is no communications, little access, and where many people have evacuated to other areas. Amazingly though, we were able to make contact with our long time teacher in the city of Tacloban, which was one of the worst hit cities. She has not yet been able to contact her blind students because of the total devastation and the breakdown of infrastructure in her area. We do know that her school lost its roof and was flooded.

Other teachers in some of the less affected areas report a flood of evacuees from the hardest hit areas. One of our blind friends from Tacloban was able to get out on a military rescue plane and is now in Manila. Most of these evacuees arrive with nothing except the clothes they are wearing. Another blind mother of four children was able to board a C-130 to Cebu and requested to stay in our guest house there, where she had stayed previously for a training. Unfortunately, we had given up our guest houses both in Cebu and Davao last year because of budget cuts, but our staff there are helping to work out some temporary living arrangements for her and her children.

In our planning last week, we have divided up the typhoon struck areas into four geographical areas of focus. The first area, the coastal cities of northern Cebu Island, is fairly accessible from our Cebu office. Our staff in Cebu have already made trips into the worst hit areas there, and brought back reports of the need—food, water and shelter of course being number one. Our plan is to extend the emergency help we can, depending on our capabilities, but then, in the longer term, to focus on helping rebuild the homes that were swept away and the schools destroyed. We won't rebuild entire schools because the government, with international aid, will take on that responsibility. But the government will not prioritize the facilities needed by students with disabilities. So that will be our area of focus—to rebuild or repair the structures needed and to replace the lost equipment and materials so that the blind children can return to school at the same time the sighted students return. The second geographical area is a little harder to reach from our Cebu office. If you have a map, it will be the northeast corner of Iloilo, where we have reports of major damage done in some coastal communities. We hope to visit some of those areas by this week or next.

The third area will be the worst hit areas in Leyte, such as Tacloban City. Those areas are still very difficult to get into and the need there is for people to be evacuated or to be given the medical care and the food and water they need for basic survival. This is where the big players—foreign governments, the UN, World Vision, etc., are focusing their efforts. Hopefully those areas can be stabilized fairly quickly which will allow us to begin our own assessment of the needs of the families with blind children, and of the school programs.

The last area is the much more remote area of eastern Samar, which I suspect will not be accessible for some time. The government is taking helicopters full of relief goods into those areas now but we will have to wait until the roads open up to find out about the blind kids we work with there. We do have quite a number of programs in those areas and want to be able to help those people as soon as possible.

That's our plan for now regarding our outreach to the families of blind children that were hit by the typhoon. We are committed to do whatever we can to help. If you would like to help us in this effort, you can go to our website at www.blind.org.ph and find options for donating.

Here are a few pictures taken by our staff while checking up on the families on northern Cebu. Sheila, in the first picture, just finished high school but because of her father's surgery on his leg, (before the typhoon) he hasn't been able to work for some time. But Sheila won an award in a singing contest which helped her family put up a small cement block house. But now it looks as if a truck drove through it and they aren't able to stay in it. We will try to help repair the home so they can move back in.



The next picture is of Ariel's family. Last school year, he won the top academic award in his fifth grade class. As you can see though, their little bamboo hut was no match for the storm. His father is a fisherman, and like most fisherman they live a hand to mouth existence. So while he is trying to fix up their home again, they have no income for their daily needs. We hope to help them with relief goods and also with materials to fix up their home to get them out of the weather.



This last picture below is of the Suyko sisters, Liezel and Lynnel. (Also at the top of the first page). Eight years ago we provided cataract surgery for both of them, which improved their vision, but they still needed to use Braille for reading. Earlier this year they both graduated from high school and are hoping to go to college. During the storm the family took shelter in a corner of their Aunt's house. When they came out, their home was gone. Their father has already started to fix up their house, as you can see in the picture, but the materials aren't readily available. Like Ariel's father, he is a fisherman but people are afraid to eat fish now because of the dead bodies floating around. So they are dependent for now on relief goods which have been distributed sporadically in their area. We want to help with that and also in repairing the house.



We are aware that even greater needs are going to come up once we get into the areas that took the full impact of Yolanda. We should know more about that within the next couple of weeks.

If you would like to help in this effort, please go to our website at www.blind.org.ph or contact us at info@blind.org.ph for other donating options. Please designate your gifts for the Typhoon Yolanda victims.

Thanks,
Randy

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Director

Resources for the Blind