

After Ketsana

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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Between May and November of each year, typhoons invariably hit the Philippines, an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands with a coastline of more than 18,000 kilometers (11,180 miles).

On September 26, 2009, Typhoon Ketsana hit the island of Luzon. It dumped more than a month's worth of rain in just a few hours. The ensuing floods damaged more than 39,000 buildings and affected four million people. The government declared a state of calamity in Manila and 25 storm-ravaged provinces.

On October 3, just a week later, Typhoon Parma made landfall and in ten days returned to strike the nation two additional times, bringing more rain to areas already drenched by Ketsana and triggering massive landslides in the northern mountain region of the nation. The San Roque Dam was forced to release water, drowning 30 towns in the coastal province of Pangasinan. More than 600 people lost their lives to the two typhoons, and the government appealed for international aid.

On September 26, Typhoon Ketsana, packing winds of up to 80 kilometers per hour (50 mph) and heavy downpours, hit the island of Luzon and flooded more than 20 provinces.



More than 90 percent of the Metro Manila area was submerged in water one-story deep. To pour salt into the wound, a fire broke out in a slum in Barangay Tatalon, Quezon City, and, in heavy rain and strong winds, burned down a row of wooden houses.

The fire was suspected to have been caused by people using candles in their homes, which were without electricity because of the storm. Fire trucks were unable to enter the narrow, flooded alleys to combat the flames. Over 700 houses were engulfed, and more than 2,000 people became homeless.

Timely aid

The burned area was very close to a Tzu Chi recycling station, only a few blocks away from the local Jing Si Hall. Early the next morning, Tzu Chi volunteers waded through the floodwaters to survey the damage. They found that many houses had been burned down to ashes.

"When the fire broke out, my children and I fled to the waterlogged streets," said Jun Jaca, a survivor. "I am grateful to the people who threw a rope to help us cross the deep water. If it weren't for them, we could have lost our lives."

But Melanie Garcia, his neighbor, was not as lucky. Jaca saw her washed away while she was fording the water with her husband and children towards safety. Later, her husband and children

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searched for her in temporary shelters and local hospitals, but they were unable to find her. In one of the hospitals, they finally found her body.

Seeing that the local residents were in dire need of food and clean clothes, the volunteers decided to give out emergency cash and aid supplies that very day. They promptly began making preparations.



They went out and bought things for the distribution. Then they cooked boxed lunches and packed daily necessities under the dim light of some flashlights and candles because water and electricity had been cut off. Despite the difficult conditions, the volunteers managed to prepare 808 meals, 600 bread rolls, 180 bags of clean clothes, and 200 pairs of slippers that they handed out to the crowd of victims waiting at the Tzu Chi recycling station. Many distribution recipients were moved to tears when they saw what the volunteers had put together for them in such a short time—hot food, various sizes of clothes, slippers and all.

A state of calamity

The day before Ketsana made landfall, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration placed several provinces under public storm warning signal number 2, reminding the residents that strong winds were expected within 24 hours.

Toward midnight of September 25, torrential rain began to pour down. Most of Metro Manila was submerged under water even before daybreak. With sewers clogged up by garbage, the water in some areas was deeper than 1.8 meters (6 feet). Roads were underwater, and the flooding swept away many people's houses, life savings, and income-providing livestock.

Given the magnitude of the devastation, the Filipino government declared a state of calamity in the Metro Manila area and 25 provinces. According to statistics from the National Disaster Coordinating Council, 337 people were confirmed dead or missing, 31,000 people were evacuated, more than 39,000 houses were destroyed, and agricultural damage was estimated at 6.3 billion pesos (US\$134 million).

As soon as the rain subsided, Tzu Chi volunteers began surveying some of the worst-hit areas to decide how best to help the victims.

Marikina City

Marikina City, hailed as the "Shoe Capital of the Philippines" because of its notable shoe industry, was hit hard by Ketsana. With heavy rain pouring down unceasingly, the Marikina River overflowed its banks and turned streets into rivers. In just six hours, the flooding turned what was arguably the most beautiful city in the Philippines into the most devastated.

On September 29, Mayor Marides Fernando met with Tzu Chi volunteers. She reported that 120,000, or four-fifths, of the households in the city had been affected, half of them severely, and about 20,000 people had been placed in 11 temporary shelters.

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After the water had receded, the streets were left with knee-deep mud. On the way to survey the damage and the situations of survivors, volunteers saw rubble, piles of garbage, damaged furniture, and vehicles bent out of shape by the floods. People had no potable water, electricity, food, or clean clothes. Some had no choice but to beg for food from vehicles passing by.

The sun had come out, and many people started to clean up their homes and dry their belongings in the sun. Remeo Francisco, 68, recalled that at the beginning of the storm, he had assured his son that everything would be fine because that area had never been flooded. He had thought that the standing water would recede as soon as the rain stopped, and so there was no need to move their belongings to higher ground.

But just as Remeo was comforting his son, raging water suddenly gushed into their house. "I went outside to see what was going on, and I was nearly washed away. My son and I ran for our lives."

As people's homes were destroyed, so were their livelihoods. When the volunteers revisited Balubad Settlement Site, they saw a few young men burning electrical wire to extract the copper strands within, a practice strictly banned by the government. A resident explained that those people had nothing to eat, and they had no choice but to sell the copper for 180 pesos per kilogram (US\$1.82 per pound).



Hot meals, warm hearts

In response to the disaster, the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan airlifted several batches of relief goods to the Philippines, beginning on September 29. The supplies included instant rice, instant soup, and reusable eating utensils.

On September 30, a relief distribution was held in the fire-stricken area. Thermal blankets made from recycled PET bottles and daily necessities such as mats, pots, clothing, eating utensils, soap, and slippers were given out to affected families. On October 1, cash was dispensed. Families with four members or less received 3,000 pesos (US\$64); those with five members or more received 5,000 pesos (US\$155); families who had lost family members received an additional 5,000 pesos. A total of 439 households benefited.

Seeing that many areas still had no electricity or running water a week after the disaster, volunteers gathered at the local Jing Si Hall on October 2 to cook for survivors in Barangay Nangka and Barangay Malanday in Marikina City. At lunchtime, despite the rain, volunteers delivered hot boxed meals to survivors. Eating from reusable containers, everyone sat together and enjoyed freshly made instant rice with curry sauce.

"I've never tasted rice so delicious, and it smells so good," said Loida Valdez. Onyok Gacita, 13, cherished his bowl of rice so much that he insisted on eating under an umbrella lest his meal be spoiled by the rain. All that the boy and his family had been eating since the storm was instant noodles and canned fish, meal after meal. That was why the hot meal delighted him so and why

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he couldn't stop telling volunteers how delicious it was.

The hot meals not only kept the flood survivors from going hungry but also warmed their hearts. Ronald Quinones, 33, said that the storm had left him and his wife physically and emotionally drained. They were still busy digging through the mud in their destroyed home to salvage usable articles. They had no time or energy to think about meals, much less to actually cook them, so they could only rely on food distributions from charity organizations. However, at many food distributions, conflicts often broke out when people pushed and shoved or got into fights so they would not miss out on the food. It was therefore refreshing for the Quinoneses to receive the hot meals delivered into their hands by Tzu Chi volunteers.

"Our savings are buried under the mud, so we have no money to buy food," said Quinones. "Sometimes, out of extreme hunger, we have no choice but to beg for food from others. I'm truly grateful to Tzu Chi volunteers for delivering hot meals to us. They bring not only food for our stomachs but also warmth for our hearts."

By October 20, volunteers had distributed over 50,000 hot meals and bread rolls, bringing warmth to many depressed hearts.



Cleaning up together

After the flood had receded, putrid garbage piled up in streets and alleys. Worried that poor sanitation might harm residents' health, volunteers launched a five-day cleanup on September 30 on Kaliraya Steet, Barangay Tatalon. With the help of bulldozers and trucks, 246 tons of garbage were hauled out. Roads in the community were finally cleared of debris and mud and traffic was restored.

Gerald Babon, a resident who ran a restaurant in the neighborhood, said, "The debris and mud left by the flood affected not only my surroundings but also my business. Because there was debris everywhere, no customer dared come to my restaurant. I suffered a heavy loss." He thanked the volunteers for helping the locals with the cleanup.

To help stem a possible outbreak of contagious diseases and to help residents get back on their feet, volunteers started a work relief program in which participants working to clean up their own community would each get 400 pesos (US\$8) and a hot lunch every day. Even local officials couldn't believe that Tzu Chi would actually pay residents to clean up their own neighborhoods. In Barangay Nangka, Barangay Malanday, and Barangay Tumana in Marikina City, the program was very successful. From October 1 to 18, several thousand people pitched in, cleaning up the filthy streets.

Some participants expressed their gratitude. Diana Waleinski, 27 years old and nine months pregnant, said she could use the money for her four children; Joven Odtujan, 35, was thankful for the income as he had temporarily lost his job at a shoe company; his colleague Carreon, who made about 160 pesos a day at the same company, was very happy to have made 400

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pesos a day from Tzu Chi. Some people made thank-you cards and others composed songs to thank Tzu Chi.

Emily Gipa, 40, said, "After the flood, there was sludge everywhere, which made it hard to get around. Now that it's all been cleared away, we no longer have to walk through all that sticky, stinky mud to grocery stores to buy stuff. That's really a relief. Thanks to everyone who has helped us!"

Free clinics

The unsanitary conditions after the storm affected many people's health. Children developed coughs and fevers, and adults contracted skin diseases, cellulitis, and diarrhea. Beginning on October 4, volunteers from the [Tzu Chi International Medical Association](#) (TIMA) worked with local churches and medical workers to hold daily free clinics and make house calls in areas including Barangay Nangka and Barangay Malanday. Services were provided in the fields of ophthalmology, pediatrics, internal medicine, surgery, dermatology, and dentistry, benefiting more than 4,700 patients in nine days.

In the long lines of patients waiting to be served, many were afflicted with skin diseases. "My feet itch and hurt badly whenever I walk. Thank you for treating me for free," said Diwa Docallos, a patient who had walked to the clinic barefoot. His feet had swollen and broken out in rashes after soaking in mud and floodwater for extended periods of time.

Dr. Aileen Uy, a TIMA member working at the free clinic, was herself a flood victim as her own house in Marikina City had also been flooded, but still she came to the free clinic to serve other victims. "I knew many of my compatriots were in dire need of help."

The free clinics truly helped many people. After the flood, Lindy Igot, 36, had been busy cleaning her house and washing all the flood-stained clothes. But she had been bothered by a toothache so badly that she often had to stop work and lie in bed, wailing with pain. As soon as she learned about the free medical and dental services provided by Tzu Chi, she went to a free clinic, where she had three teeth pulled out. "I'll rest a day, and then I'll get right back to work cleaning my home."

Other than providing services at the free clinics, some doctors also went door-to-door to make home visits. Walking on muddy streets, they often heard people calling out to them for help.

Lydia Torres, 53, had been feeling rather helpless at the recurrence of a skin disease. She never expected that doctors would come to her home and give her free treatment and medication. She thanked them heartily for relieving her discomfort.

On October 20, responding to the rising prevalence in the disaster areas of leptospirosis, an infectious disease that affects the kidneys and liver, the Tzu Chi Philippine chapter also gave 360,000 medicine tablets to people in Marikina City.

One week after Typhoon Ketsana hit the Philippines, Typhoon Parma struck the nation, bringing more damage and distress. The two typhoons forced around 300,000 people to evacuate their

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homes. More than 600 people were reported dead or missing, and there was even a shortage of coffins in some areas.

Though destruction and grief abound, Tzu Chi volunteers continue to give aid and care to the suffering in order to give them a sense of community support and to accompany them in their struggle to return to normalcy.

By Erika Vizcarra, Nyanza Donna Nakar, Madona Corado, Chieh Fang Uy
Translated by Evelyn Yi-chih Sung