

AP



TODD PITMAN



Gemunu Amarasinghe • AP

A dog sniffs around a pile of burned car tires and human bones as the local cemetery caretaker and her daughter stand nearby. 36 Muslims, most of them teenagers, were slaughtered in Meikhtila on March 21, 2013, before the eyes of police and local officials who did almost nothing to stop it.

Reporting from Myanmar and the Philippines

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July 6, 2013

AP IMPACT: AFTER MYANMAR MASSACRE, MUSLIM MINORITY LEFT WITH NO JUSTICE, LITTLE PROTECTION

BY TODD PITMAN

MEIKHTILA, Myanmar (AP) — Their bones are scattered in blackened patches of earth across a hillside overlooking the wrecked Islamic boarding school they once called home.

Smashed fragments of skulls rest atop the dirt. A shattered jaw cradles half a set of teeth. And among the remains lie the sharpened bamboo staves attackers used to beat dozens of people to the ground before drowning their still-twitching bodies in gasoline and burning them alive.

The mobs that March morning were Buddhists enraged by the killing of a monk. The victims were Muslims who had nothing to do with it — students and teachers from a prestigious Islamic school in central Myanmar who were so close to being saved.

In the last hours of their lives, police had been dispatched to rescue them from a burning compound surrounded by swarms of angry men. And when they emerged cowering, hands atop their heads, they only had to make it to four police trucks waiting on the road above.

It wasn't far to go — just one hill.

What happened on the way is the story of one of Myanmar's darkest days since this Southeast Asian country's post-junta leaders promised the dawn of a new, democratic era two years ago — a day on which 36 Muslims, most teenagers, were slaughtered before the eyes of police and local officials who did almost nothing to stop it.

And what has happened since shows just how hollow the promise of change has been for a neglected religious minority that has received neither protection nor justice.

The president of this predominantly Buddhist nation never came to Meikhtila to mourn the dead or comfort the living. Police investigators never roped this place off or collected the evidence of carnage left behind on these slopes. And despite video clips online that show mobs clubbing students to death and cheering as flames leap from corpses, not a single suspect has been convicted.

International rights groups say the lack of justice fuels impunity among Buddhist mobs and paves the way for more violence. It also reflects the reality that despite Myanmar's bid to reform, power remains concentrated in the hands of an ethnic Burman, Buddhist elite that dominates all branches of government.

"If the rule of law exists at all in Myanmar, it is something only Buddhists can enjoy," says Thida, whose husband was slain in Meikhtila. Like other survivors, she asked not to be identified by her full name for fear of retribution. "We know there is no such thing as justice for Muslims."

The Associated Press pieced together the story of the March 21 massacre from the accounts of 10 witnesses, including seven survivors who only agreed to meet outside their homes for security reasons. The AP cross-checked their testimony against video clips taken by private citizens, many with the date and time embedded; public media footage; dozens of photos; a site inspection, and information from local officials.

The day before the massacre began like every other at the Mingalar Zayone Islamic Boarding School — with a call to prayer echoing through the darkness before dawn.

It was Wednesday, March 20, and 120 drowsy students blinked their eyes, rising from a sea of mats spread across the floors of a vast two-story dormitory.

Set behind the walls of a modest compound in a Muslim neighborhood of Meikhtila, the all-male madrasa attracted students from across the region whose parents hoped they would one day become Islamic scholars or clerics.

The school had a soccer pitch, a mosque and 10 teachers. It also had a reputation for discipline and insularity — the headmaster, a strict yet kind man with a wispy beard, only allowed students outside once a week. Muslims made up about a third of Meikhtila's 100,000 inhabitants, compared with just 5 percent of Myanmar's population, and they lived peacefully with Buddhists.

The Muslims, though, were nervous after sectarian clashes in western Rakhine state in June and October last year killed hundreds and drove more than 140,000 from their homes. Both times, the madrasa shut down temporarily as a precaution.

The unrest was aimed at ethnic Rohingya Muslims, who have lived in Myanmar for generations but are still viewed by many Buddhists as foreign interlopers from Bangladesh. The hatred has since morphed into a monk-led campaign against all Muslims, seen as "enemies" of Buddhist culture.

When classes began on March 20, student gossip quickly turned to an argument on the other side of town between a Muslim gold merchant and a Buddhist client, which had prompted a crowd of hundreds to overrun the shop and set it ablaze.

That afternoon, several Muslim men yanked a monk off a motorcycle and burned him to death. Buddhist mobs in turn torched Muslim businesses and 12 of the city's 13 mosques.

In Mingalar Zayone, some teachers skipped courses. Then classes were canceled altogether.

Students rushed to the dormitory's second floor and gazed out of the windows, in shock. Black and gray columns of smoke were rising in the air.

At dinner a couple of hours later, the sound of a teacher weeping filled the hall. His family home had been burned with his parents inside it. Some students pushed their food away.

As the sun slunk in a hazy sky, a Buddhist government administrator came to the gate of the madrassa and took the headmaster aside.

"You need to get your students out of here," he warned. "You need to hide. The mobs are coming — tonight."

At sunset prayers, the headmaster told everyone to collect their valuables, their money, their ID cards — and prepare to leave. He asked them to remove their head caps, Islamic dress and anything that might identify them as Muslim.

He never explained why. He didn't have to.

"If they try to destroy this place, we'll do our best to stop them," he said. "But whatever happens, we will not let you die."

After dark, they crept deep into a swampy jungle of tall grass a block away called the Wat Hlan Taw, and the tall reeds swallowed the school's refugees whole.

Most were students and teachers. But at least 10 women and their children were also among them, relatives or residents too terrified to stay in their own homes.

They sat down in the mud. Nobody said a word.

Soon, they heard the mob approaching — dozens, maybe hundreds of voices, a cacophony of menace and anger that grew louder by the second.

The voices were at the gate of their madrassa. And then they were inside, kicking in doors and smashing windows.

In the darkness of the Wat Hlan Taw, a teacher named Shafee with a stomach ailment reached for his wife's palm and squeezed it hard.

"If they find us," he whispered nervously, "you know I won't be able to run."

"Don't worry," his wife, Thida, replied, cradling their 3-year-old son in her arms. "We'll be together, every step. I'll never leave you."

As the long night wore on, the madrassa burned down.

At 4 a.m., Buddhist prayer gongs rang out, and the mobs began shining flashlights into the Wat Hlan Taw. Some Buddhists fired rocks into the bush with homemade slingshots.

"Come out, Kalars!" they shouted, using a derogatory word for Muslims.

The Muslims ran to a neighboring compound, owned by a wealthy Muslim businessman. Some tore down a bamboo fence to get inside.

The mobs were not far behind.

Thida heard a boy screaming behind her, a student who had been trying to call his mother on his cell phone.

He had waited just a few seconds too long to run.

As the first rays of dawn touched Mingalar Zayone, Koko, a quiet, heavy-set 21-year-old student, peered over the compound's thin fence and felt numb. Men clutching machetes and sticks were girding for a fight outside.

Hundreds more were gathering on a road running across a huge embankment that shadowed the neighborhood's western edge. The embankment had always been there, but now it seemed to seal them inside the bottom of a huge, oppressive bowl from which they could not escape.

Koko could almost feel the blood draining from his cheeks. He felt weak, no longer human.

"We're trapped," he thought, "like animals."

Some students were frantically making calls for help — to parents, to police. Some were chanting loudly. Others were scouring the property for anything they could use to defend themselves — wooden boards, rocks the gangs outside had thrown at them.

By the time an opposition lawmaker, Win Htein, arrived around 7:30 a.m., dozens of helmeted riot police were on the scene. The security forces, equipped with rifles and gray shields, had formed lines to keep the Buddhist hordes away from the Muslims.

Win Htein saw the head of police and the district commissioner standing nearby, and the bodies of two dead Muslims on the edge of the Wat Hlan Taw. Over the next 45 minutes, he

watched in horror as mobs of men chased five more students out of the bush, one by one, and hacked or bludgeoned them to death in broad daylight.

As stone-faced police officers stood idle just steps away, crowds cheered like spectators in a Roman gladiator show.

"They must be wiped out!" one woman shouted.

"Kill them all!" shouted another. "We must show Burmese courage!"

Win Htein felt nauseous. He wanted to vomit. In two decades of prison and torture under brutal military rule, he had never seen anything like this.

When he tried to convince people in the crowds to spare the Muslims, the mobs began threatening him. One Buddhist man demanded bitterly: "Why are you trying to protect them? Are you a Muslim lover?"

An officer advised Win Htein to leave.

Shortly after, a monk and four policemen offered to escort the trapped Muslims on foot to several police vehicles on top of the embankment.

"We'll protect you," one officer said. "But the students must stop chanting. They must put down their weapons" — their sticks and stones.

As the teachers debated what to do, they realized their time had run out. The crowds were flinging long bamboo staves wrapped with burning fabric over the fence like giant matchsticks. The compound was on fire, belching orange flame and black smoke into the air.

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The group emerged slowly with their hands behind their heads, like prisoners of war.

Police led them down a narrow dirt track — a long line of desperate people, crouching in terror. Almost immediately, they were stoned by livid residents of a tiny Buddhist neighborhood who attempted to block their way.

What followed was a gantlet from hell, an obstacle course that came with its own set of macabre rules: Do not run, or they will chase you. Do not fall, or you may never get back up. Do not stop, or you may die.

Police fired several rounds into the air, but the crowds attacked anyway. A teacher was knocked to the ground, and panicked students stepped over his body, sprawled face down in the dirt.

Koko saw a friend hit across the forehead with a hoe. When he tried to stand again, five men with knives dragged him off.

The mobs then attacked Koko with machetes from behind, slicing six palm-sized gashes into the flesh of his back. Blood stained his yellow shirt. He fell and blacked out.

One officer, struck in the face by a rock, apparently by accident, shot a Buddhist man in the leg. The crack of gunfire woke Koko, who realized he had been left for dead and leapt to his feet to catch up with the group.

As they moved inside the Buddhist neighborhood on the path to the trucks, police ordered the Muslims to squat down.

Crowds taunted and slapped them. Several women forced them to bow their heads and press their hands together in prayer like Buddhists. And according to testimony gathered by Physicians for Human Rights, they also shoved pork, which is prohibited in Islam, into the mouths of the Muslims.

One man swung a motorcycle exhaust pipe into a student's head. Another hit him with a motorcycle chain. A third stabbed him in the chest.

"Don't kill them here," yelled one monk. "Their ghosts will haunt this place. Kill them up on the road."

The monks said the police should round up the women and children and let them go first. When Thida refused to let go of her husband, a Buddhist man shoved a palm in his face and forced them apart. Another man she recognized tried to grab her 3-year-old.

"He's still breast-feeding. Leave him alone!" she shouted, pulling away.

The man then grabbed her 9-year-old, but pushed him back in disgust when he wailed.

Amid the confusion, one Buddhist woman hurriedly waved two of Thida's teenage daughters into her home to protect them, in an act of kindness. Both would be reunited with Thida several days later, unharmed.

As Thida and about 10 women and children climbed the hill, several riot police pushed back the stick-wielding crowds around them with open palms. A video reviewed by the AP records a man trying to dissuade the mobs, saying: "Don't do this. There are kids there as well."

But the violence continued.

Buddhists still clearing the Wat Hlan Taw forced a thin 17-year-old student named Ayut Kahn out into an open patch of low grass. In a scene captured on video by at least two different unidentified people, the boy — a Meikhtila native with a stutter who loved soccer —

was struck 24 times by nine people with long sticks and bloody machetes. Five blows were from a monk.

"Look! Look!" one Buddhist bystander shouted from the top of the embankment as the student was murdered. "The police are heading down there, but they aren't doing anything."

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The last time Thida saw her husband, he was struggling to climb the hilltop road where she waited anxiously beside police. Two teachers were by his side, their arms locked in his. Mobs swarmed the steep embankment between them.

Shafee's face was pale. He had never looked this way — so exhausted, so drained, so helpless.

Across the hillside, Thida could hear the cries of hate.

"Kill the Kalar! Don't leave any of them behind!"

"Clean them up! They are just dirty things!"

Somewhere below, several students tried to make a run for it. Crowds chased them.

Somebody pummeled 14-year-old Abu Bakar across the cheek with a bamboo stick. Somebody else sliced the back of 20-year-old Naeem's legs with daggers. Yet another clubbed Arif — the teacher who had wept at dinner the night before — to the ground.

Police stood on both sides of the hill watching, unmoved. When a boy sitting with them at the bottom of the slope looked up, an officer slapped his head and shouted: "Keep your eyes down!"

A frantic monk waved a multicolored Buddhist flag screaming for the killing to stop. "This is not the Buddhist way!"

The crowd backed away briefly, but police left the wounded behind.

One video clip of the moments that followed shows seven Muslim men curled on the ground beneath a grove of rain trees. The faces of at least three are heavily covered in blood. A man in a green jacket swings a bamboo stave down on the wounded with all his might.

The camera pans to another group of three other crumpled men. One is Shafee, who is lying face down, pulling his legs in toward his stomach.

"Oh, you want to fight back?" a voice says, laughing.

A grainy video filmed shortly after shows flames leaping from a pile of 12 charred corpses in the same spot, and onlookers backing away from a smoky body rolling down the hill. Another video shows crowds cheering.

Thida could only smell the burning flesh. She hugged the leg of a police officer standing beside her and asked: "Hey, brother. Please. Please. What is happening to us?"

"Shut up, woman," the officer replied. "Keep your head down. Don't you know you can die here, too?"

In all the mayhem, several dozen police reinforcements arrived to escort the remaining Muslims to the hilltop and load them onto trucks.

As they pulled away, Koko knew he would never return to Meikhtila.

"There is nothing left of our lives here," he said to himself. "There is only Allah."

The trucks took the traumatized survivors to a police station, where they were offered water, and, by at least one officer, an apology.

In all, about 120 Muslims survived — among them, 90 students and four teachers. They stayed several days at a police station before being bused to another town to join their families.

The dead totaled 32 students and four teachers, according to the headmaster, who cross-checked their deaths with families and witnesses.

The head of state security in the region, Col. Aung Kyaw Moe, who ordered the rescue operation, said "10 or 15" died on the way. But video obtained by the AP, shot by unidentified witnesses touring the area after the killings, contradicts that claim. Two videos alone indicate at least 28 people died, most of them blackened corpses with fists and arms reaching into the air; one is decapitated.

When the people filming pass one body, a voice can be heard saying: "Hey, is that a child?"

"No, he's just short," another replies, chuckling.

The police present that day were the only ones with rifles and guns, which would have been no match for the crude weapons carried by the mobs. But while they rescued more than 100 Muslims, they did not stop the massacre of dozens of others.

"They were of two minds. We could see that," the headmaster said. "Some of them tried to help us ... but in the end, they all watched us die."

Win Htein, the lawmaker, said there were two explanations: Either the "police didn't get any order from above (to shoot), or they got the order from above not to do anything."

Aung Kyaw Moe, the regional security chief, insisted he had given authorization to fire. But he said police didn't shoot because "doing so could have angered the crowds and made the situation even worse."

He said even though 200 police were deployed to the area, the crowds outnumbered them, and Muslims died because "some of them tried to run."

"They scattered and our forces could not follow every one of them," he said. "They had to take care of the rest of the people they were guarding. ... On the front lines, some things cannot be clearly explained."

During a tense 50-minute interview, Aung Kyaw Moe said he was "satisfied" with the job police had done.

But he grew increasingly agitated, saying five times that it was "inappropriate" to ask for details because "you're not writing a novel, you're not making a movie ... you don't need to know."

The first people prosecuted for the violence in Meikhtila were not the Buddhist mobs. The first were Muslims.

On April 11, a court sentenced the gold shop owner and two employees to 14-year jail terms for theft and causing grievous bodily harm. On May 21, the same court sentenced seven Muslims to terms ranging from two years to life for their roles in the killing of the monk the day the unrest began.

On June 28, a Buddhist man was convicted of the murder of a Muslim elsewhere in Meikhtila and sentenced to seven years in jail, according to state prosecutor Nyan Myint. He said 14 Buddhists have been charged and are on trial for the Mingalar Zayone killings, some for murder, but none has yet been convicted.

Justice "is a matter of time," he said. "The courts are proceeding with the trials and have no prejudice or bias against any group."

Aung Kyaw Moe, the security chief, said all those arrested were residents of Meikhtila, but he gave no other details.

No police have been reprimanded.

Similar patterns of justice have played out in other towns.

After Buddhist mobs burned several villages in the central town of Okkan in April, the first convicted was a Muslim woman accused of starting it by "insulting religion." She had knocked over the bowl of a novice monk. Muslims say it was an accident.

And after more Buddhist mobs rampaged through the eastern city of Lashio in May, setting Muslim shops alight, the first convicted was the Muslim man authorities say triggered the unrest by dousing a Buddhist woman with diesel fuel and severely burning her.

One Muslim man was killed in each incident, but no one has been prosecuted.

After the massacre in Meikhtila, the corpses rotted for at least two and a half days before the government sent workers to haul them away, some on garbage trucks. The remains were taken to Meikhtila's main cemetery, where they were simply burned again in an open patch of red dirt with used car tires and gasoline and left for stray dogs to pick through.

Authorities say they did not hand the bodies back to the relatives of the dead because they were too badly burned to be identified. But families of those slain say they were never even asked, and never given the chance to bury their loved ones according to Islamic rites.

No Muslim families have dared visit the cemetery or return to the massacre site.

The mood in the neighborhood is still hostile to outsiders. When AP journalists visited the area, residents stared silently.

One barefoot woman washing clothes beside a well where a pile of charred corpses were dumped claimed she had no idea what happened that day, because she wasn't there.

Her friend looked up and said: "Tell him what started it. Tell him about the gold shop, the monk who was killed."

Ma Myint shook her head, squinting up briefly in the direction of the hilltop.

Those bones "mean nothing to me," she said.

The school's headmaster pulls out a single sheet of blue-lined paper from his pocket. On it, handwritten, are the names and ages and hometowns of the dead.

What bothers him the most isn't the decision he made to take his students into the Wat Hlan Taw, or the nightmares he has had since. It's that those who were slaughtered could have been saved.

Most of those beaten to the ground did not die immediately, he says.

"Had anybody stepped in to help them even then, to push back the mobs, to pick them up and take them to the hospital — they could have lived," he says.

He has told many of the 90 students who survived to lie low and not testify for fear of reprisal. He dreams of gathering them together again and rebuilding his school elsewhere, but he is too afraid of sectarian violence flaring anew to say where or when.

"Where is safe in this Myanmar?" he says. "Who will protect us?"

On March 21, the headmaster urged his students not to fight back.

"Next time, we will defend ourselves," he says quietly, "because we know that nobody else will."

Nov 13, 2013

AGONY FLOWS FROM WALL OF WATER, THE THREAT MANY IN PHILIPPINES TYPHOON'S PATH DIDN'T EXPECT

BY TODD PITMAN

TACLOBAN, Philippines (AP) — Two days before the typhoon hit, officials rolled through this city with bullhorns, urging residents to get to higher ground or take refuge in evacuation centers. Warnings were broadcast on state television and radio.

Some left. Some didn't.

Residents steeled themselves for the high winds, floods and mudslides that routinely come with the typhoons that afflict this tropical nation. But virtually no one was prepared for Typhoon Haiyan's storm surge, a 6-meter-high (20-foot-high) wall of water headed straight for them.

"It was supposed to be safe," said Linda Maie, who stayed in her one-room house more than half a kilometer (mile) inland. She had heard the warnings but said her Tacloban (tuk-LOH-ban) neighborhood "has never even flooded in my 61 years."

Her family stocked up on canned food, water and candles and covered their TV, laptops and appliances in plastic bags. But when her 16-year-old daughter, Alexa Wung, awoke at 5 a.m. Friday to howling winds and heavy rain, it was clear that Haiyan was not a typical storm.

The house was shaking. Its wooden door frame and window hinges were banging. Peeking through the windows, Alexa saw doors and screens flying and crashing.

Their neighborhood was coming apart.

Water began seeping in through the doorway as Alexa huddled in the tiny house with her mother and brother. Then it burst through like an explosion, ripping half the door off and quickly flooding the room with knee-high water. Within minutes, it was chest-high.

By now, the family was on the dining table, watching in horror. Alexa's brother, Victor Vincent, glanced at the ceiling as the precious pocket of air grew smaller. They thought of escaping, but Linda couldn't swim.

Alexa checked her cell phone. It was 8:30 a.m. The icon for her mobile service provider was replaced with a circle with a slash through it.

"I knew then that even if we could scream for help, nobody in the world could hear us," Alexa said. "We were cut off from everything."

And the water was still rising.

It would be more than a day before the outside world knew what had happened.

Haiyan was among the most powerful typhoons on record when it struck, with wind estimates at landfall as high as 315 kph (195 mph). But the first news reports hours later suggested that it had moved across the islands so fast that the country might have escaped a major catastrophe. The reality was that Tacloban and other hard-hit communities had been cut off, with electricity and cell phone towers knocked out.

The worries, in Tacloban and around the world, had been on the wind much more than the water. That's why many of the 800,000 people who were evacuated found themselves in seemingly sturdy concrete buildings that could not protect them when the storm surge — sea water pushed by the typhoon — rushed in.

"Everybody knew a big storm was coming," said Mark Burke, an American native of Washington state who lives in Tacloban with his three small children and worked as a civilian pilot on contracts supporting U.S. naval forces in the region. "But I had no idea it was going to be this hell. ... Nobody imagined what was about to happen."

The water rose so high that some residents punched holes in their roofs with their bare hands to escape.

Burke and his kids hid in a bedroom until a wall of mud came through the doors. The master bed was floating.

"Then we all got on the piano, and it started floating through the hallway," he said. "The water kept rising, and we eventually climbed up into the attic and stayed there for a day and a half."

In another part of Tacloban, Eflide Bacsal was standing in the kitchen of her family's home when the wall of water hit with a furious roar.

"It was like a bomb — BOOM!" said her 23-year-old sister, Gennette Bacsal. "It felt like an earthquake."

The wave smashed through the windows and swept Eflide off her feet, sucking the 26-year-old under the swirling water. She frantically waved her arms, trying to find something to grasp. Her fingers closed around the power cord to the refrigerator. She held on as tight as she could and tried to pull herself to the surface, but the water only pushed her deeper.

She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Couldn't see. In her panic, she began swallowing water. Everything went black. She felt herself dying. She surrendered.

And then, a hand appeared — her father's. He grabbed her shirt and yanked her to the surface.

He hauled Eflide to the second floor of their home, where they waited along with Eflide's sisters and mother until the surge had passed.

Other family members were less fortunate. Relatives including Eflide and Gennette's brother, 38-year-old Gonathan Bacsal, had taken refuge in a church, but they fled as water rushed in. As they ran through nearby woods, a cousin was decapitated by a piece of metal that whizzed through the air.

Young and elderly relatives who could not swim were trapped by the rising water, but the family said Gonathan rescued many of them. He, too, was killed by debris: The storm blew several nails and a shard of metal into his neck.

As Alexa and her family stood on their dining table, they contemplated their own deaths. The water was at Alexa's chest, and her mother's chin.

"Where will we go? What can we hang on to?" Alexa cried.

They were still amazed by the flood. No typhoon could cause this, Alexa thought.

Then her mother was splashed by water on her lips. It was salty. It dawned on them: This was from the sea.

Fish fluttered across Alexa's back, and she recoiled in a panic.

The family was at their very limit, and so, thankfully, was the storm. The water stopped rising, and began, very slowly, to recede. It was again knee-high by the time Alexa walked outside.

Their neighborhood, of barber shops and restaurants and homes and streets filled with small buses known here as jeepneys, was gone. There was only a vast sea of debris: wooden beams filled with nails, shattered toilets and glass, concrete rubble, uprooted trees, twisted power transformers.

Survivors wandered, dazed and wounded, covered in mud and grime. Many were barefoot with seeping gashes in their feet and bruises all over. Some covered their wounds with cloth, or diapers.

"Tacloban was unrecognizable," Alexa said. "It was as if Tacloban never existed at all."

There was something else in the flattened landscape: corpses. And five days after Haiyan leveled Tacloban, many are still there.

Scores of them lay at roadsides for authorities to retrieve, covered with whatever people could find — corrugated iron rooftop slabs, wooden planks, cardboard, a broken desk drawer.

Two bodies wrapped in white tarps lay on a bus-stop bench. Another sat on the ground below. People rolling luggage and carrying backpacks walked past, covering their mouths to protect against the sickly stench.

One orange dump truck moved through the city to collect the remains. Emergency workers unloaded a dozen of them at building that once sold souvenirs. In all, there were more than 170 bodies in black bags, spread side by side.

Bulldozers have cleared debris from most main streets, but the sidewalks are filled with everything imaginable: broken speakers, typewriters, cables, artificial Christmas trees.

There have been no major food distributions. The city's main hospital has been gutted. Medicines are running out. Police can be seen chasing scavengers through the streets.

International humanitarian organizations have yet to arrive. With no tents, people are sleeping in destroyed homes. One family took shelter in the shade of a giant uprooted tree, and cooked under a ripped gray rooftop held down with a broken basketball pole.

And some people are even farther away from help. On Tuesday, military helicopters flew 15 minutes from Tacloban to the wasteland of a town called Tanawan, past a lake with bodies still floating in it and over bridges that had collapsed.

Amid the ruins, desperate residents frantically waved their arms. Many had scrawled desperate messages in the ruins: "HELP! FOOD. WATER." Some messages appeared to be in chalk. One cry for help was spelled out in white clothing.

Today, American and Filipino C-130 cargo aircraft roar constantly at the Tacloban airport. Each plane can only take out around 150 people, and every flight is a disappointment to hundreds of residents left behind on the tarmac.

Gennette and Eflide have made it to Cebu. Burke and his kids flew to Manila.

Alexa and her mother walked two hours to the ravaged airport terminal in hopes of leaving. Victor asked them to leave, so he could worry about guarding the house instead of feeding them.

They were near the front of the flight line on Tuesday. But after a C-130 landed, the crowd surged to try to get to the plane. The crush of people was so intense that a 7-year-old girl passed out. Alexa and Linda could not endure it and stepped away.

They sat on a curb, under an umbrella. Alexa was in tears. Their destroyed city lay behind them, an apocalyptic graveyard marked with disfigured trees and ruin. They said the government, and the world, had done nothing to help them.

Their new plan: to leave Tacloban by bus and reach relatives in Manila.

Alexa said she will return, eventually.

"Filipinos have a saying: Weeds don't die easily," she said. "When it's safe, when there is electricity, when it's livable, I'll come back."

AP writers Jim Gomez and Kristen Gelineau in Tacloban contributed to this report.

Nov 16, 2013

24 NEW LIVES STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE IN CHAPEL-TURNED-HOSPITAL IN AFTERMATH OF PHILIPPINE TYPHOON

BY TODD PITMAN

TACLOBAN, Philippines (AP) — Althea Mustacisa was born three days ago in the aftermath of the killer typhoon that razed the eastern Philippines. And for every one of those three days, she has struggled to live.

But she has clung to life because her parents have been pushing oxygen into her tiny body with a hand-held pump non-stop ever since she came into this world.

And "if they stop, the baby will die," said Amie Sia, a nurse at a hospital in typhoon-wracked Tacloban city that is running without electricity and few staff or medical supplies.

"She can't breathe without them. She can't breathe on her own," Sia said. "The only sign of life this little girl has left is a heartbeat."

More than a week after ferocious Typhoon Haiyan annihilated a vast swath of the Philippines, killing more than 3,600 people, the storm's aftermath is still claiming victims — and doctors here fear Althea may be the next.

When the fierce storm smashed into this tropical country on Nov. 8, it transformed Tacloban into an unrecognizable wasteland of rubble and death.

The bottom floor of the two-story government-run Eastern Visayas Regional Medical Center was flooded, and the intensive care unit for newborns was left a muddy ruin. Life-saving machinery, like the facility's only incubator, was soiled with water and mud.

As the storm hit, doctors and staff took 20 babies who were already in the intensive care unit to a small chapel upstairs for their safety, placing them three or four in one plastic crib cart built for one newborn.

With the chapel converted into an ad-hoc neonatal clinic, all the babies survived initially. But six died later, "because we lack vital medical equipment that was destroyed," said the attending physician, Dr. Leslie Rosario.

Within days, however, 10 more babies born during or in the aftermath of the storm were taken in, including Althea. She was born at the hospital on Nov. 13, weighing 2.65 kilograms (5.84 pounds), suffering from an inability to breathe.

Doctors performed CPR on her and since then they have been giving her oxygen from the hand-held pump connected to a blue rubber bubble that fits into her tiny mouth and draws sustenance from a green tank through a transparent pipe.

Doctors said the storm had not been a factor in the baby's problems, noting that insufficient prenatal care most likely complicated the pregnancy for the 18-year-old mother. The baby was not born premature.

Still, there was a good chance of saving Althea had the hospital been equipped with electricity that would have run a ventilator, incubator and other life-saving equipment.

Until Saturday, the makeshift ward in the chapel had no light except candles. On Saturday, one small fluorescent bulb attached to a diesel generator was hung in the middle of the room where a few packs of diapers sit on the altar below a picture of Jesus.

On the floor are a few more boxes of the only medical supplies left — water for IV fluids, syringes, a handful of antibiotics.

The hospital also lacks manpower. In the neonatal clinic alone, only three out of 16 staff are still working, Rosario said. The rest never reported back after the storm. The Philippines Department of Health sent two nurses from Manila to help.

The hospital chapel's windows are all shattered and missing. It is now filled with 24 babies — five of them in critical condition, the rest with fevers or other ailments. Many were born premature.

Their parents are there too, resting on 28 rows of wooden pews. Three mothers have IV drips in their arms.

Nanette Salutan, 40, is one of them. She said her labor contraction began just as the winds from Haiyan began howling. The contractions continued after the storm eased, and she walked to the hospital with her husband. It was an eight-hour trek through corpse-filled rubble and waist-high water.

"All I could think was, I wanted my baby to live," Salutan said.

Her baby boy, Bernard, was born the same night — at 2:13 a.m. He weighed just 2.6 kg (5.73 lb) and measured 45 centimeters (17.71 inches) tall.

But he did not cry, and they knew immediately something was wrong.

The baby was not breathing.

Doctors performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation, and put clear green tubes of oxygen in his nose. He is still so weak that he has to be fed by a syringe that is connected to a tube taped to his mouth.

Rosario said Bernard had a decent chance of survival. But Althea's prognosis is not good.

In a heart-stopping moment, her body turned blue as her breathing became more labored. Doctors rushed in and connected an IV needle into the remnant of her umbilical cord -- the one in her wrist had been there too long to be effective, they said. Slowly life flowed back into her tiny body.

"If we had a ventilator, it's possible she could live," Sia said. "But right now she's very weak, and I don't think she's going to make it."

"They've been traumatized by the typhoon, and now they're traumatized because they're trying to keep their baby alive," Rosario said of Althea's parents. "They're physically and emotionally exhausted."

As she spoke, Althea's mother, Genia Mae Mustacisa, leaned over her baby girl, stroked her forehead and kissed it.

The newborn lay on a wooden table, eyes closed, wrapped in a blue- and white-striped blanket. Her feet poked out, revealing a pair of mismatched socks — one with pink and red hearts, one of the "Peanuts" comic character Snoopy sweeping with a broom.

Methodically, her mother squeezed a green rubber bag attached to the tall tank of oxygen slowly over and over, every few seconds, just as her husband had done for half an hour before.

"It's OK," she whispered, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I love you so much. No matter what happens, I love you so much."

Nov 19, 2013

A BASKETBALL GAME, A DANCE, A SMILE: SIGNS OF LIFE AMID MISERY REVEAL FILIPINOS' SPIRIT

BY TODD PITMAN

TACLOBAN, Philippines (AP) — They found the hoop in the ruins of their obliterated neighborhood. They propped up the backboard with broken wood beams and rusty nails scavenged from vast mounds of storm-blasted homes.

A crowd gathered around. And on one of the few stretches of road here that wasn't overflowing with debris, they played basketball.

I didn't know what to think at first when I stumbled upon six teenagers shooting hoops over the weekend in a wrecked neighborhood of Tacloban, a city that Typhoon Haiyan reduced to rubble, bodies and uprooted trees when it slammed into the Philippines Nov. 8.

As a foreign correspondent working in the middle of a horrendous disaster zone, I didn't expect to see people having a good time — or asking me to play ball. I was even more stunned when I learned that the basketball goal was one of the first things this neighborhood rebuilt.

It took a moment for me to realize that it made all the sense in the world.

The kids wanted to play so they can take their minds off what happened, said Elanie Saranillo, one of the spectators. "And we want to watch so we, too, can forget."

Saranillo, 22, now lives in a church after her own home was leveled by the storm.

Countless families lost loved ones to the typhoon, which killed more than 4,000 people. Hundreds of thousands of survivors have endured unimaginable suffering: hunger, thirst, makeshift shelter, little if any medical care, and a desperate, dayslong wait for aid to arrive. Tacloban was filled with hopeless, fear-filled faces. Even now, blackened bodies with peeling skin still lay by the roads, or are trapped under the rubble.

But as the crisis eases and aid begins to flow, hope is flickering. People smile, if only briefly, and joke, if only in passing. They are snippets of life. They do not mean, by any stretch, that people are happy in the face of tragedy. But for some, there is a newfound enthusiasm for life that comes from having just escaped death.

When a kid with mismatched shoes rolled the grimy, orange-and-yellow basketball my way, I was encouraged to attempt a slam dunk. I opted for free throws instead, and miraculously sank the first two, to immense cheers all around.

My third shot hit the rim, circled twice and rolled the wrong way. The crowd roared a sympathetic "Awwwwwwwwww." There were a lot of laughs.

In Saranillo's neighborhood, I saw four giggling children jumping up and down on two soiled mattresses strung across a cobweb of smashed wooden beams that had once formed somebody's home. Two women stood on a hilltop high above, dancing.

A few yards (meters) away, a 21-year-old named Mark Cuayzon strummed a guitar. He too, was smiling. And in this city virtually erased by nature, I had to ask why.

"I'm sad about Tacloban," he said. "But I'm happy because I'm still alive. I survived. I lost my house, but I didn't lose my family."

I covered the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami in Japan, and cannot recall a single laugh. Every nation is resilient in its own way, but there is something different in the Philippines that I have not yet put my finger on.

While walking through Tacloban's ruins, I and my colleagues were almost always greeted by kind words. When I asked how people were doing, people who had lost everything said, "Good." Superficial words, of course, but combined with the smiles, and with hearing "Hey, Joe" again and again (an old World War II reference to G.I. Joe), they helped form a picture I have not encountered in other disaster zones.

Perhaps it has something to do with an expression Filipinos have: "Bahala Na." It essentially means: Whatever happens, leave it to God.

Elizabeth Protacio de Castro, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Philippines in Manila, said her nation has grown accustomed to catastrophe. Some 20 typhoons barrel across the nation every year. Add to that earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, armed insurgencies and political upheaval.

"Dealing with disaster has become an art," de Castro said. But Typhoon Haiyan "was quite different. It was immense, and no amount of preparation could have prepared us to cope with it."

And yet, they must cope.

"So rather than screaming or staring at the wall in a psychiatric ward, you do everything you can. You do your best, then let it go," said de Castro, who helped provide psychological aid to victims of the 2004 Asia tsunami during a previous job with the U.N. Children's Fund.

People playing music or sports in the rubble, de Castro said, "is a way of saying, 'Life goes on.' This is what they used to do every day, and they're going to keep doing it."

"It's not that Filipinos are some happy-go-lucky people and don't care," she added. "It's a normal reaction to an abnormal situation. They're saying: 'I can deal with this. I'm at peace, and whatever happens tomorrow, happens.' ... They need help, of course, but they're also saying, they're going to get by on their own if they have to."

De Castro has been counseling students in Manila who lost parents and siblings to the storm, and said some have displayed incredible determination. "They've lost their entire families, and they're telling me, 'I have to finish my studies because my parents paid my tuition through the end of the year.'"

That sense of determination is literally written in the ruins of Tacloban.

One handwritten message painted on a board outside a destroyed shop said the "eyes of the world" are on the city. It added, "Don't quit."

Those who have gotten a chance to leave Tacloban have done so, of course, though many will no doubt return one day.

On Monday, I rode on a U.S. Air Force C-17 out of Tacloban to Manila, along with about 500 people displaced by the typhoon. There were babies and pregnant women. Some had tears in their eyes. One man held a doll with stuffed animal-like angel wings. He stared at it intensely, kissing it over and over.

As the plane neared Manila, an American crew member held her iPhone to her helmet's microphone, which was linked the aircraft's speaker system.

She hit play, and Earth, Wind and Fire's 1978 hit "September" belted out. The sea of eyes squatting on the cargo plane immediately turned radiant.

Men twirled their arms. Women swayed back and forth, and the words echoed through the plane's cargo hold:

"Do you remember ...

While chasing the clouds away,

Our hearts were ringing,

In the key that our souls were singing.

As we danced in the night. Remember,

How the stars stole the night away."