



The after life



What happens when your community is destroyed and your family lost? Last November, one of the strongest storms in history hit Tacloban in the Philippines. [Kate Hodal](#) visits one year on. Photographs by [Simon Roberts](#)



Before (left): Tacloban two months after the storm. After (right): now, houses have been repaired and a fish and vegetable market has

returned. Previous pages: a container ship washed ashore in Anibong after the typhoon hit. Now, a shantytown has been built there



They spent the first few weeks after the typhoon hunting for food and their two small children. They walked through the rubble of their city, among the dead and the living, like zombies, asking neighbours and scanning ad hoc burial sites. They even waded into the oily waters where their house once stood - before the ships pummelled their waterfront neighbourhood, leaving a mess of bloated bodies, twisted metal and broken concrete.

It was one of those ships that saved Urwin Coquilla, 37, and his wife, Ethel, that early grey morning of 8 November. Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest storm to make landfall in recorded history, tore through the Philippines at speeds of 195mph, ripping up farms, levelling villages and leaving more than 6,300 dead. The family hadn't evacuated their home in Tacloban - Ethel believed they would weather the storm, as they had every other - so when the tidal wave shattered the floor from underneath their feet, and the ships came rolling across the land, they were swept out into the swirling black water.

The children clung on desperately to their parents, but they were torn from Urwin's arms and disappeared into the storm. There was so much in the water - debris, people, animals, filth - that when a massive ship hurtled towards him, Urwin could only just grab the rope hanging from its deck and fling his wife aboard. Then, shakily and clumsily, he climbed on as well, only to fight off the ship's enraged captain, who was screaming, through the howling wind, that the couple weren't authorised to use the life jackets hanging in the storeroom.

When the waves receded, Urwin looted destroyed shops for supplies and searched under piles of rubble for his children, coming across small bodies with mud-covered faces, swollen with seawater. He found lifeless babies who could have been his, but weren't. Even after they began rebuilding their home and spent their days queueing for relief goods, still the couple searched.

To give up felt impossible, Urwin says now, a bald, light-skinned man with patches of vitiligo that streak his forearms and legs. "After how many weeks," he says slowly, "we decided to accept the fact that our children were gone.

We had to move on and continue living." Like so many others who lost everything to the storm - their home, their family, their livelihoods - he shrugs at the question. How does a person, a city, a whole country even, recover from such a horrendous event?

A disaster-prone nation, the Philippines sees, on average, 20 typhoons a year, in addition to a host of earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, droughts and landslides. But never before had its 100m-strong population been witness to such a violent display of nature as Haiyan - a category-5 super typhoon, known locally as Yolanda. Tacloban City, a provincial capital, was hardest hit, but the devastation went far beyond. In the aftermath of the storm, local and national governments were left with a logistical nightmare: roads and airports to disaster zones were blocked by debris, thousands were dead, thousands more were missing, millions had been displaced - and there was no clear strategy as to how to get the worst-hit areas back on their feet.

"The preparation of the local governments and the national government agencies was not equal to the strength of the typhoon," admits »



Before (above): the farming community in Tanauan clears fallen coconut trees after the storm. After (right): new trees are being planted, but it will take seven years for them to bear fruit



Before (above): people queue for soap, mosquito nets and water purification kits in San Jose in the aftermath of the typhoon. After (right): now the construction of larger boats gives fishermen the ability to fish farther offshore – and coral beds and fish stocks a chance to recover



Corazón “Dinky” Solíman, who, as head of the Department for Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), oversees the nation’s disaster response.

She lists some of the factors that contributed to the mayhem. A population accustomed to living with typhoons had underestimated the strength of Haiyan, causing many people to stay in their homes when the storm made its devastating landfall.

Evacuation centres became death traps after they filled with water. Emergency response teams, such as medics and police officers - who could have helped in the wake of the typhoon - were also victims of its wrath, leaving whole regions lawless and vulnerable as desperate survivors scoured the streets looking for food, water and medicine.

The aid, when it finally did trickle in - by local accounts some four days later, but by Solíman’s much sooner than that - was unevenly distributed. Tacloban residents complained that

only *barangay* (wards), and in some cases voters, of the same political affiliation as president Benigno Aquino III were getting help. Some locals were having to sneak into other districts just to eat or claim assistance. Others who lived near rubbish tips alleged that whole boxes of edible food had been dumped by large trucks and buried in front of them, with the grounds closed off so no one could dig it up again.

The allegations were astonishing, not only because they spoke of a political rivalry that had plagued the nation for years, but because that rivalry was being played out on such an international stage and at such a crucial time. Tacloban’s mayor, Alfred Romualdez, had complained for months after the storm that his city was suffering because of bad blood. But in September, startling revelations were made, via a 102-page Independent Commission on Audit

report: Solíman’s office had wasted nearly £1m worth of food packs due to improper storage or handling; had failed to distribute nearly £10m in cash assistance to victims; and either stored in government bank accounts, or spent on government operations, tens of millions of pounds originally intended for relief and rehabilitation efforts.

Solíman admits there was a breakdown of communications and “political differences” which led to “difficulty working with the mayor himself”, but claims that what resulted was beyond the control of her department. Glossing over the accusations of buried aid, she points her finger instead at shipping crews that failed to secure the relief. “The goods were not covered at all,” she says, “exposing [them] directly to the elements of weather - seawater, rain and direct sunlight - resulting in the spoilage. »



Before (above): homes by a lake in San Jose destroyed by the typhoon. After (right): using debris and reclaimed materials, people have tried to rebuild those homes

A population accustomed to living with typhoons had **underestimated** the strength of Haiyan, causing many people to stay in their homes when the storm made its devastating landfall. Evacuation centres became death traps after they filled with water

“Nevertheless,” she adds, “we’re investigating the incident, and those who are responsible for this will be asked to answer.”

There is a gun Guillermo Ramirez keeps in his now derelict upstairs bedroom which he toys with sometimes, playing with the idea of an easy way out. Life for the 87-year-old former boxer and rebel soldier is bleak: the two-storey house he built half a century ago is almost entirely destroyed, bar the dark living room he now sleeps in with his 81-year-old wife, Teresa, and their two grandsons. Their ceiling - a badly fastened tarpaulin - leaks a permanent drip on to the cot they share at night. Finding food, and work, is a daily worry.

“It is very, very hard,” says Guillermo, holding back tears. “My wife has tumours in her uterus. We can’t afford the medication and the doctors say it is too dangerous to operate. But she is bleeding, every day.” He waves to the piles of concrete rubble that still fill their veranda, a wide space that once boasted views out towards the sea and now looks on to a mass of debris. “I am angry, and I have no hope. Some days I get so depressed, I think about getting my gun and shooting myself in the head. But I can’t leave my wife like that.”

Teresa shakes her head. “It’s no good,” she says softly, in English. “But where is the help?”

Nowhere in Tacloban is Haiyan’s destruction, and its aftermath, seen more clearly than in Anibong, the coastal neighbourhood home to both Guillermo and Urwin. The area was once vibrant, full of homes, schools and businesses shared by civil servants, teachers, food vendors

and cock fighters. “It was beautiful,” Urwin says. But the storm brought with it tidal waves, and with those waves came the handful of large cargo ships and oil tankers - and a number of their containers - that washed on to the land and flattened everything in their path, eventually settling on the rubble like tombstones.

Today, the neighbourhood is little more than a chaotic shantytown. Nearly 90% of the 7,000-odd residents have come back, say local barangay councillors, and nearly all of them have rebuilt their homes in the same location as their former dwellings - but this time with materials salvaged from the storm. Battered corrugated iron, white UN tents, mouldy cardboard, old blankets and bits of tyre now make up walls, roofs and doors, leaving the inhabitants vulnerable to even light rainfall, let alone another typhoon. Along the waterfront, near a smattering of shanties in clear violation of the government’s new “40-metre no-build zone” signs, groups of children play badminton in oversized flip-flops. A thick layer of broken glass, shredded plastics, litter and decomposing organic waste serves as their playground.

“For people who know how governments should be working, how resources should be used for recovery, it’s been slow,” says Sabyte Lacson-Paguio, Oxfam’s humanitarian and policy advocacy coordinator, of Tacloban’s progress one year on. Like many others, she blames this on politics. “According to law, when a disaster is this huge, the national government has to come in,” she says. The fact that Manila failed to act in time says something profound. “They weren’t

prepared at all. They lost communication. That’s why it’s going to take a long time to rebuild: they’re going to have to rethink their entire development framework.”

Mayor Romualdez, an affable 52-year-old who barely survived the typhoon himself, is regarded locally as a man who has tried hard to improve his city, shaping it into a regional powerhouse that wins awards and has low unemployment rates. But Haiyan helped thrust other issues into the public light: namely the Shakespearean family rivalry between Romualdez and President Aquino.

While both men come from powerful family clans, their bad blood goes deeper than that. Aquino’s father was a much-loved politician who returned from self-exile in 1983 to liberate the Philippines from the dictatorial Marcos regime. But he was assassinated on the tarmac as he stepped off the plane - a hit largely believed to have been ordered by Romualdez’ uncle, Ferdinand Marcos himself.

Today, the mayor lives in a tiny room above his wife’s beauty salon, a bolt hole they moved in to after their home near Tacloban airport was destroyed. He expresses great remorse that he can’t show more for the regeneration of his city, despite the \$1.6bn that was pledged internationally to help rebuild the Philippines after the typhoon.

“I have real difficulty answering organisations and agencies when they visit,” he sighs. “They look around the city and then come to my office and say, ‘We sent thousands of dollars to Tacloban through the embassy, or through this »



Before (above): shelters are set up in the aftermath of the storm in Tacloban. After (right): the shelters have gone but residents are still living in shantytowns



Urwin Coquilla and his wife, Ethel, believed they could weather the storm. Their children clung on to them but were torn from Urwin's arms and disappeared. The couple are now expecting a baby

or through that.' I tell them, 'I'm sorry, it didn't go through us - it went through the mechanism of the national government.'"

The mayor claims to have received only 250m pesos (£3.5m) in aid from Manila, £2.7m of which was required to be spent on rebuilding government offices and infrastructure projects. The rest, he was told, could go towards livelihood or rehabilitation efforts for victims.

It's barely enough to help relocate the 14,000 families who need to be moved from disaster zones such as Anibong and San Jose, he says, let alone to initiate programmes to jump start the economy, or help launch his "master plan", which takes in disaster mitigation, revamped building codes and civilian participation.

"When I get into a bad relationship with the central government, my people suffer," he says. "So I'm trying to walk on thin ice to get things done, but at the same time my hands are tied. It's a very difficult position."

President Aquino's spokesman, Edwin Lacierda, calls such allegations "entirely inaccurate". "Political rivalry is a convenient excuse," he says. "[But] politics has no business getting in the way of providing assistance to affected areas and should not be used as a scapegoat." Aquino has directly charged national government agencies with the task of rehabilitating all affected areas, Lacierda says, and consequently some local governments have made better progress than others.

One recent Wednesday morning not far from Romualdez' former waterfront property, a crowd of a few hundred people surround a former mansion,

its windows and doors still missing. Everyone here lives in a white UN tent - intended to fit up to 10 people, or two families - and a queue has formed as aid workers prepare cash vouchers to help people begin rebuilding their old homes. Like so much of the assistance locals say they've received in Tacloban, this funding isn't coming from the government, but from an NGO. Some 8,000 pesos (£110) have been earmarked for each family whose house suffered total damage, or 5,000 pesos for partial destruction, explains Charlie Reyes of the Green Mindanao foundation. It's not much, he says, but this is the first real aid many of these people have seen. "The people [here] really feel abandoned by the local government," he says. He has seen a high level of aggression among survivors, which he believes is proof of the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder. "Even now, men who go out scavenging for wood or to go to the toilet in the grasses, they will come across a skeleton, another body that was never found after the typhoon."

A petite girl, her toddler on her hip with a smartphone in its mouth, is queueing with her brother in the stifling mid-morning heat. Sherryn Escon, 17, has been living in a tent for six months. Although her clothes are clean, her slicked-back ponytail is teeming with lice eggs. "After the typhoon we started looking through all the stores to see if there was any food or supplies we could take," she says, shyly. "If we found any dead animals we would check they were safe to eat." Life one year on is little better, she says. "Drinking water is very hard to find, and when it rains, the

rain comes straight into the tent, so we have to sleep on platforms to avoid the flood." She motions to the aid workers filling out vouchers, and smiles. "At last we'll live like normal people."

Before Haiyan, San Jose, where Tacloban's airport stands, was a vibrant neighbourhood, full of two-storey homes and lower-class dwellings. Now the road from the airport into the city centre is lined with shelled-out structures, shanties cobbled together from salvage, and hundreds of filthy white tents. One recently burnt to the ground, killing the family inside, after a candle set the place alight.

"Tacloban will take a long time to come back," says Emilia Sumalinog, 45, a former tent resident who has since been moved into one of the relocation sites on the northern edge of the city. "There are too many people like us, people who need support. People don't want to be relocated when there's no livelihood. If you move fishermen into the mountains then you have to assure them they'll make a living somehow."

Two brothers, friends of Sumalinog, nod in agreement. The pair still live in this "tent city", spending their days out on their boat, catching the small amount of fish that the post-typhoon waters provide. The government has promised them a temporary home by 8 November, the first anniversary of the typhoon, but they say they'll likely come straight back here to build a small, illegal shack on the water, to serve as their weekday home. "What else are we going to do in the new site?" one of them asks. "It's so far from the sea, and we are fishermen. We'll go to the new site only at the weekend to visit our wives."»

Life in the temporary relocation sites doesn't promise much in the way of hope. Far from their former homes and old jobs, many residents suffer from a lack of drinking water, intermittent electricity and nothing to do: most of them are whiling away the days until the government provides them with new work - whenever, and whatever, that might be.

Located up a northern stretch of two-lane highway roughly 45 minutes from the city centre, New Kawayan is made up of around 100 thatch huts with a shelf life of three years. Rain regularly seeps in through the crisscrossed thatch walls, and the roofing - in some cases corrugated iron, in other cases thatch, too - doesn't extend far enough over the windows to prevent sunlight or water from entering inside. "We're happy to not be in a tent any more, but at night, it's just unbearable," says Amilia Palanas, who shares the one-room space with her husband, father-in-law and two children. "The solar power works only during the day, so even though we have a fan we can't use it at night, and it's impossible to sleep."

Families here still get by on relief goods - rice, noodles and instant coffee delivered by the DSWD or charities - and there are community courses in subjects like candle-making, in an attempt to give residents something to do.

"This is the process: first you stay in an evacuation centre, then the temporary shelter,

Men who go out scavenging for wood, or go to the toilet in the grasses, will come across a skeleton

then the permanent housing," says camp manager Joanne Dollette, who admits that many of the residents need jobs. "Once the permanent housing is completed" - she waves her hand to a nearby site under construction, where UN-Habitat and the local GMA TV station have begun building concrete homes - "then new tent people will move in here, to this site. It is like recycling."

Nearby, at the temporary relocation site Tagpuro, a hillside construction that looks out on to rolling green fields, we stumble across a funeral for a one-year-old boy, his tiny body wrapped in a white collared blouse. His mother, Rhodora Latorre, has spent her few spare pesos on his white and gold, glass-topped coffin and an oversized crucifix and candelabra. His father left soon after

his birth, she says, and her parents were washed away in the typhoon, leaving her to tend, all alone, to her sick son from a tent in San Jose. "Every day in the tent, he was sick," she says of her son. "It was so hot in the morning, and so cold at night. Nine months in a tent is a long time for a baby."

Although Filipino politicians have called for a probe into the national government's disaster response, President Aquino has said he stands by Soliman and the DSWD. Full reconstruction and rehabilitation will take years, and there are glimmers of growth in Tacloban city - roughly 90% of its 240,000 residents are back, says Romualdez; the streets are teeming with markets, new shops and restaurants (some of them named "Haiyan"); and the Pope's visit in January will buoy spirits. But a year on, much of the hope one might expect to see is still not present.

For Urwin and Ethel, who have submitted DNA to the National Bureau of Investigations to try to locate their children among the scores of unidentified corpses at Holy Cross cemetery, the only progress they see is their own: Ethel is expecting a new baby before the new year - a gift granted, they say, by their two "angels". But still they have no closure.

"Up to now, the results are still not with us," says Urwin. "We are still waiting." ●

Watch Urwin Coquilla talk about typhoon Haiyan at theguardian.com/video

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