

Vietnam Evacuates Hundreds of Thousands Ahead of Storm



Hanoi, December 25 (RHC)-- Hundreds of thousands of people in Vietnam's Mekong Delta have been evacuated as the region braced for the arrival of Typhoon Tembin after the storm left more than 160 people dead in the Philippines.

Weather forecasters were expecting the delta's southern tip to be in Tembin's path, and said heavy rain and strong winds starting Monday night could cause serious damage in the vulnerable region, where facilities are not built to cope with such severe weather.

National television station VTV reported that several hundred thousand people were evacuated from their homes, which are mostly made from tin sheets and wooden panels.

Typhoons and storms rarely hit the Mekong Delta. But in 1997, Tropical Storm Linda swept through the region, killing 770 people and leaving more than 2,000 others missing.

Over the weekend, Tembin unleashed landslides and flash floods that killed at least 164 people and left 171 others missing in the Philippines, according to Romina Marasigan of the government's main disaster-response agency.

Initial reports from officials in different provinces placed the overall death toll at more than 230, but

Marasigan warned of double counting amid the confusion in the storm's aftermath and said the numbers needed to be verified.

More than 97,000 people remained in 261 evacuation centers across the southern Philippines on Monday, while nearly 85,000 others were displaced and staying elsewhere, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council said.

The hardest-hit areas were Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur provinces and the Zamboanga Peninsula. Tembin hit the Philippines as a tropical storm but strengthened into a typhoon before blowing out of the country Sunday into the South China Sea toward Vietnam.

Philippine officials had warned villagers in accident-prone areas to evacuate early as Tembin approached and the government was trying to find out what caused the widespread storm deaths, Marasigan said. She added that it was difficult to move people from homes shortly before Christmas.

"We don't want to be dragging people out of their homes days before Christmas, but it's best to convince them to quietly understand the importance of why they are being evacuated," Marasigan said at a news conference in Manila.

Tembin was among a series of disasters to hit the predominantly Roman Catholic Philippines at the peak of Christmas preparations.

An inter-island ferry sank off northeastern Quezon province Thursday after being lashed by fierce winds and big waves, leaving at least five people dead. More than 250 passengers and crewmen were rescued. Earlier in the week, another tropical storm left more than 50 people dead and 31 others missing, mostly due to landslides, and damaged more than 10,000 houses in the central Philippines.

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