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Flood of tears as hundreds drown



Aftermath: Mindanao people pick up the pieces after the weekend's flash flood which killed hundreds

Pictures: AFP



MANILA: More than 650 are feared dead after tropical storm Washi unleashed flash floods across vast areas of southern Philippines.

Relief workers said 652 people died and another 808 were missing after the storm wreaked havoc, destroying entire neighbourhoods.

About 20,000 soldiers were mobilised in a huge rescue and relief operation across the stricken north coast of the island of Mindanao, where the major ports of Cagayan de Oro and Iligan were worst hit.

Cagayan de Oro city repor-

ted 346 dead, and nearby Iligan city lost 206 residents, Red Cross officials said.

Iligan mayor Lawrence Cruz said rampaging floodwaters from swollen rivers swamped up to a quarter of the city of 100,000.

"It's the worst flood in the history of our city," Mr Cruz told GMA television. "It happened so fast, at a time when people were fast asleep."

The station showed dramatic pictures of a family escaping out of the window of their home in the town as the floods rose, and rescue work-

ers in orange vests shepherding survivors to safety in above chest-deep waters.

Other heartbreaking scenes showed crying parents holding the limp bodies of perished children. President Benigno Aquino ordered agencies to map out areas most vulnerable to future floods. "These areas will be at risk every year. The first (step in) mitigation has to be relocation from these areas," he said in a meeting with senior civil defence officials.

National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management

Council chief Benito Ramos said Mindanao residents were warned about the dangers posed by the storm days earlier but elected not to move to safer areas.

Marlyn Manos, an Iligan resident, recounted how she and her children watched in terror from their rooftop as the floodwaters swallowed up the neighbourhood.

"All the small houses behind ours were destroyed, and many of my neighbours are missing," she said.

Iligan tourism officer Pat Noel told AFP waters began

rising shortly before midnight on Friday as people slept, sweeping houses made of light materials and their inhabitants along river banks.

"Many of them told me they sought refuge on their rooftops," he said, after joining the first wave of rescuers at daybreak.

Two of the three rivers that flow into the port of Iligan had overflowed, he added.

Officials said 347 people were still missing in Cagayan de Oro and 447 in Iligan, and a Negros official said 19 people were missing there.

Recovery to take...