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Religious gather, typhoon much on their minds

Thomas C. Fox | Nov. 11, 2013 NCR Today
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Women religious from throughout Asia began to gather here over the weekend as the nation -- and wider world -- was awakening to the vast devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan.

The typhoon, with winds closing in on 200 miles per hour and causing waves more than a story high, ripped through the central section of this nation on Friday, causing widespread destruction, displacement, and some 10,000 deaths.

The toll is likely to mount as communications with cut off regions are re-established. Thousands of people are missing in the ruins of towns and villages on many of this nation?s 4,500 islands. The typhoon overwhelmed the country's ramshackle infrastructure, turning the provincial capital of Tacloban into a flattened sea of splintered wood and curled metal roofing.

Some of the 80 women meeting here come from the very areas hit hardest by the storm, one of the largest, if not the largest, ever recorded in this section of the world.

The theme of this gathering deals with mysticism and prophecy and informal discussions quickly focused on issues of the environment and the need to speak out on behalf of the people of the Philippines, especially the victims. Some of the women here live in towns and work with families who have been victimized by the storm.

The group plans to send a strong statement to climate officials meeting in Russia to discuss climate change, urging environmental safeguards.

In the eyes of many of the women here, there is little doubt environmental factors are involved in the devastation. Several reported to the group that black sand mining along the coasts of some Philippine islands has eroded critical safety barriers. Black sand is a valued ingredient in the computer industry and is a controversial Philippines export.

One woman religious reported that a Japanese freighter carrying sand overturned in the storm near a central Philippines island. This could not be independently confirmed.

Meanwhile, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, archbishop of Manila, opened the conference with greetings, prayers and a Eucharist.

The gathering is taking place in a retreat center two hours south of Manila by car. The women meet every three or four years on the banner of AMOR, "Asia-Oceania meeting of Religious." Here they share stories, challenges and concerns common to the women.

This is the 16th time the group has met since the early 1970s.

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