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CRS, Caritas Philippines ready to speed relief to thousands after storm

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service

Washington — As thousands of Philippine families remained in shelters, Catholic Relief Services and Caritas Philippines prepared to speed household supplies and water to eastern sections of Mindanao affected by powerful Typhoon Bopha.

Packing 120-mph winds and torrential rains as it made landfall on the country's southern-most island Tuesday, the storm left at least 300 people dead and hundreds more missing, Joe Curry, CRS country representative, told Catholic News Service.

The storm also washed out dozens of roads and bridges, destroyed much of the region's electrical grid and severely damaged banana plantations in the fertile Compostela Valley.

Speaking by phone Wednesday from Cagayan de Oro in northern Mindanao, Curry said 13 CRS workers had fanned out across eastern provinces to assess the situation.

"They're seeing families on the streets without homes, families in evacuation centers," Curry said. "There's a lot of housing damage. This is an area of the world where housing is quite fragile."

The two church-based agencies, working with social action centers of several dioceses, planned to begin distributing pots and cooking supplies, sleeping mats, blankets, basic hygiene materials and water to communities in Compostela Valley and Davao Oriental provinces Thursday, Curry said.

Valley residents seemed to be unprepared for the storm, Curry told CNS, unlike in northern Mindanao, where authorities ordered the evacuation of 30,000 people.

The region hit by Typhoon Bopha is usually spared devastating tropical storms, which usually take a more northerly route, according to meteorological records. Typhoon Washi in December 2011 hit northern Mindanao and its overnight deluge led to flash flooding as people slept in their homes, taking more than 1,200 lives and displacing hundreds of thousands.

Curry said casualties in northern communities from Bopha were few and that damage was limited to flash flooding triggered by the storm.

Fr. Antonio Galela, social action director in the Diocese of Tandag, appealed for food, water, clothing and other basic necessities in a statement on the website of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines.

"Food is the immediate need of the people affected by the typhoon particularly here in Tandag, especially in the evacuation centers," Galela told church-run Radio Veritas on Tuesday.

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Similar appeals were made by the social action directors in Surigao and Mati dioceses.

Authorities said at least 120,000 people in 13 provinces were affected by Bopha, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News. An estimated 87,000 people took shelter in 162 evacuation centers.

The National Federation of Small Fisherfolk Organization called on the bishops' conference to open parishes and churches in Mindanao to shelter tens of thousands of people left homeless by the typhoon.

Fernando Hicap, the federation's chairman, said the failure of the government to provide enough shelters for flood and disaster victims prompted the organization to appeal for help from the bishops.

"Ordinary and poor people are living in life-threatening conditions, and we hope this situation merits the attention of the CBCP leadership," Hicap said.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino announced at least \$195 million in aid for victims and damaged infrastructure.

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