



# Rising from the ruins: Life in Tacloban after Typhoon Haiyan

Gina Baldesco shares her experience of returning home after Haiyan

SILENT streets under a clear night sky. That is how my brother described Tacloban City in the Philippines on the evening of November 7, 2013 – one day before ‘super typhoon’ Haiyan, known in the Philippines as Typhoon Yolanda, was expected to make landfall.

Tacloban is very close to my heart. It is where I was born and raised; where I received my degree in nursing; where I met my husband and raised our family; and where I worked as a registered nurse for more than 15 years before moving to Ireland in 2006. I have been working at the National Maternity Hospital in Dublin since then.

12.45pm, November 7: It’s 8.45pm in the Philippines. During my lunch break, I decided to call my brother Exzur, to check on him and my other siblings as they readied themselves for the impending storm. “It’s so quiet here,” I remember him telling me on the phone. “Not a person in sight and the skies are so clear you can see all the stars,” he added.

Tacloban seemed like a city preparing for war – people hoarding stockpiles of food; children helping their parents wrap their clothes and other personal belongings in plastic; families quickly being ushered by soldiers into the dozens of evacuation centres across the city. Everybody knew that Haiyan was going

to be an incredibly strong typhoon as the national weather bureau had warned them that the eye of the storm would move across the city. The sense of peace that my brother felt that night would be horribly disturbed hours later.

At around 4am Philippine time, my younger brother Ray and his wife Lynly, woke up to the shrieking sounds of strong winds. Typhoon Haiyan made landfall on the morning of November 8 and the force it brought over the Philippines’ Eastern Visayas region, where Tacloban is located, was unmatched not just in the country’s history, but since records began, packing winds of up to 315km per hour. It was the strongest typhoon to make landfall in world history.

Typhoon Haiyan almost wiped Tacloban City and its neighbouring towns off the map, destroying whole communities and leaving thousands of men, women and children dead. Thousands more would be listed as missing. At exactly 7.43am, Tacloban City was struck by the now infamous ‘storm surges’. A tsunami-like phenomenon that occurs when strong winds, brought about by a storm, push the sea inland.

Tacloban was continuously hit by these surges and was completely submerged in a matter of minutes, killing thousands of people instantly, especially those who

lived along the coast. Whole families were torn apart; fathers and mothers were forced to let go of their children because the rushing waters were so strong; homes, both wooden and concrete, fell like dominoes across the city.

Huge cargo ships docked at the local port were swept ashore by waves as high as 15 metres, crashing into hundreds of homes along the coast. People from all of walks of life clung to trees and power lines, drenched in rain and their own tears as they saw loved ones and friends around them drown in a sea of water and debris. Many of those directly hit by the floods could not hold on any longer and simply let themselves go. The city and its citizens became witnesses to a horrific scene of unparalleled destruction.

Here in Dublin, my family and I were still awake in the early hours of November 8, watching various news feeds. Dozens of journalists, both local and international, had arrived in Tacloban days before but only one local news crew managed to do a live report from the heart of the city at the height of the typhoon. It was through their live report that we witnessed Tacloban being struck by the storm surges. We felt completely helpless seeing our beloved hometown being destroyed right before our eyes.

Five long hours later, the typhoon



Gina Baldesco (pictured on the right) visited several schools where she addressed pupils on basic hygiene and assisted the Red Cross distributing cartons of milk to the children

finally subsided. The people of Tacloban walked out of their homes and saw their hometown devastated beyond recognition. Massive piles of debris clogged the major thoroughfares and bodies were strewn all over the streets. Families were forced to scour through the debris in search of their relatives. Not even a bicycle could get through because of the amount of wreckage Haiyan had left.

All lines of communication were damaged. Our calls could no longer get through – Tacloban City was virtually cut off from the rest of the world. When Haiyan left, the struggles of the people of Tacloban had only begun. Looting took place as families became desperate to find food for themselves. When the first military aircraft landed in the local airport on the morning of November 9, Tacloban was not just a city in ruins, it was a city in absolute chaos. Aid did arrive in the following days, but for many it was too slow or too late.

For us, the fact that we had no idea what had happened to our loved ones ate away at us. The lack of information was almost unbearable for me. Like us, Filipinos all over the globe flooded social networking sites to look for information on their families and friends' whereabouts. Our frantic search for information even forced us to put our relatives' names on numerous online missing lists. It was three days after the typhoon that we finally received word that, thankfully, all our relatives had survived. My youngest

brother, Truvene, was lucky enough to use a satellite phone and called my cousins in Manila. His only requests being for water, food and medicine.

Days and weeks passed, and the dead were still lying on the streets along with the debris in many places in Tacloban. The stench of death was everywhere. Funeral parlours were packed with cadavers and hospitals had to put signs outside their entrances urging people to bring their dead immediately to the morgue. Some of the corpses were seen floating around the bay. While Tacloban was flooded with relief being sent from all over the Philippines and neighbouring countries, its people still had to endure the stench of rotting corpses.

When recovery operations began, there were so many casualties that it was necessary to construct mass graves in the outskirts of Tacloban. In Palo and Tanauan, the two worst-hit towns in Leyte province after Tacloban, the dead were also placed in mass graves. By late November, most of the debris had finally been cleared off the streets and the dead buried. Despite the lack of electricity in many areas, by mid-December, Tacloban, along with the rest of the Eastern Visayas region, was at last on the long, difficult road to recovery.

#### **INMO deployment**

As a nurse, my foremost duty is to assure the well-being of others. The well-being of my loved ones and friends was

certainly my priority when the scale of destruction that Haiyan had left in Tacloban became apparent. Following the typhoon, I decided to contact the Irish Red Cross and told them that I was ready to help should they decide to send aid workers to the affected areas. And when the INMO then announced their plan to send nurses to the Philippines to help in the recovery, I did not hesitate to put my name forward. For me, this was the least thing that I could do to help my hometown.

After much preparation, I, along with six other Filipino nurses chosen by the INMO, arrived in the Philippines on June 3, 2014. While my colleagues were deployed to affected areas in the western part of the country, I went to Tacloban, the epicentre of the humanitarian crisis.

When I landed, it was evident to me that a great deal of work needed to be done. The airport was still being repaired and the roads around the airport were inhabited by families, living in tents provided by relief agencies. I noticed that many houses were using tarpaulins provided by the UN for their damaged roofs. On the other hand, life has returned to some sense of normalcy for most people as work and classes have resumed. Homes have been repaired or rebuilt and local businesses, especially those located in the city centre looked to be on the fast track to recovery.

In co-ordination with the Leyte chapter

of the Philippine Red Cross, I immediately began my four weeks of volunteering with other Red Cross workers. On June 9, I met with Valdemar Aguilar, head of operations for Task Force Yolanda – the main force behind the Philippine Red Cross’s relief programmes in Leyte province – who assigned me to the health services division. During the following two days, I worked with other volunteers at the Red Cross Tacloban headquarters in providing basic medical treatment to walk-in patients, from checking their blood pressure to dispensing medicine.

On June 11 we headed to the town of Pastrana, Leyte on a 6x6 truck – a two-hour drive from Tacloban. At Pastrana Central School, I talked to the pupils and teachers about promoting basic hygiene, with pupils taking part in a short demonstration of proper hand washing. Red Cross volunteers then distributed milk cartons to the pupils. We also travelled to three schools in the remote townships of Yapad, Tingib and Manaybanay. There, the students I met told their stories of survival during Typhoon Haiyan.

On June 13 and 15, we went to the town of Dagami, Leyte where I spent most of my childhood years. During the typhoon, Dagami was submerged in very high flood waters and many homes incurred heavy damage, especially in the town centre, including those of my relatives. Thankfully, none of them were hurt and, like the students at the four remote schools we visited in Maragondong, Plaridel, Candagara and Hitumnog, they are now doing much better and are doing their best to recover. Along with those four townships, we visited schools in Magliwaliw, Guinarona, Cabuloran, Banayon and Cansamada.

On June 17, I and other Red Cross volunteers travelled to La Paz, Leyte. ‘La Paz’, when translated from Spanish, means ‘peace’ but during Typhoon Haiyan, everything but a sense of peace was felt in this town. A further three schools in the townships of Tarugan, Caltayan and Calagusan were visited by Red Cross workers, with a total of 111 students taking part in workshops on basic cleanliness.

On June 19, before leaving, we provided medicines to patients at the clinic. Medicines such as paracetamol, mefenamic acid and cough syrup were dispensed by Red Cross volunteers. We then went on a two-hour drive to the town of Javier, Leyte. There, we visited four primary schools in the townships of Calzada, Batug, San Sotero and Guindapunan. In Guindapunan, a mixed group of first, second and third-class pupils was composed of only 17 students. We took note of this and returned to Tacloban afterwards.

While June 22 was spent in helping out at the Red Cross headquarters, I, along with my brothers and their families, travelled back to Dagami on 23 June to visit relatives who lived in the township of Kalipayan. In the local Waray language, Kalipayan means ‘happiness’ and this was what I saw on the faces of my cousins, nephews and nieces whom I haven’t seen in years. They gratefully received packs of clothes and other donations as well as bags of groceries.

On June 27, we returned to Guindapunan Primary School in Javier. Like hundreds of other educational institutions all over Leyte province, the facilities at Guindapunan still showed the heavy damage it received as a result of Typhoon

Haiyan. There, I, along with my colleague Kaki Cabrera of the INMO and other Red Cross volunteers, distributed school supplies to the pupils donated by the Kaliwat Iliganon Association Ireland through Cres Abragan of the INMO International Nurses Section. We also delivered school bags and umbrellas.

Despite lacking some facilities and basic school necessities, the young students were determined to learn, telling me what their dream jobs were. Their persistence in spite of many hardships they had to face daily was admirable.

On June 28 and 29, the annual Pintados and Sangyaw Festivals were held in Tacloban. A grand street parade, full of colourful performers, took place in the city centre. The festival centred on the theme of ‘pasasalamat’ or thanksgiving, with a large portion of the parade dedicated to thanking all the local and international relief workers and volunteers who helped Tacloban recover after Haiyan.

The most important event in Tacloban, the annual city fiesta celebrations, then took place on June 30. It was the first city fiesta to take place since the typhoon. Despite Haiyan, Tacloban had a very joyous and celebratory atmosphere, something I greatly appreciated after everything the city and its people had gone through.

On July 1, I met with my fellow Red Cross volunteers for the last time, thanking them for their kindness and all the work they had done in helping Leyte province rise again from the ruins. Their youthful energy and enthusiasm were truly exceptional.

On July 3, after saying goodbye to my family and friends, I left Tacloban City and headed for Manila before going on the long journey back to Dublin.

I would like to sincerely thank the INMO for giving me the opportunity to return to Tacloban and work with the Philippine Red Cross. When I left my beloved hometown, I felt a sense of confidence that I had done my part, however small it may have been, in assuring that Tacloban City and the rest of the typhoon-affected areas are on the road to recovery.

To all those who have helped and are continuing to help the Philippines rebuild, thank you! As we say in the Waray language, *Damo nga Salamat!*

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Gina Baldesco, pictured right along with fellow INMO member Jenasky Cabrera, flew the INMO flag throughout her time in the Philippines working with the Red Cross