

The New York Times

"A STORY THAT
SEIZES YOU WITH A
VISCERAL FORCE."
MANOHLA DARGIS **The New York Times**

November 12, 2013

As the Living Receive Aid, Bodies Remain Uncollected in the Philippines

By **RICK GLADSTONE**

The corpses of Typhoon Haiyan, which have been part of the ravaged landscape of the central [Philippines](#) for days and nauseated survivors as they walk past, are among the stark images from the disaster that struck last week. But medical experts say the unburied dead are not a significant public health hazard.

Although the smell of rotting remains can be overwhelming, and many survivors have criticized the Philippine authorities for not doing more to urgently collect them, the dead in this disaster were not considered carriers of germs that can infect the living. While they can become a problem if they contaminate drinking water supplies, that risk is considered low at best in the typhoon catastrophe zone, where relief workers are providing imported water anyway.

“The widespread belief that corpses pose a risk of communicable disease is wrong,” the World Health Organization says in a guide to [disposal of the dead](#) on its website. “Especially if death resulted from trauma, bodies are quite unlikely to cause outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid fever, cholera or plague.”

Compared to the aftermath of the [2004 tsunami disaster](#) in Indonesia, where more than 250,000 people died, and [the 2010 earthquake in Haiti](#), which disputed accounts say killed between 158,000 and 316,000, the Philippine calamity could turn out to be low. Yet like other mass-casualty emergencies, particularly in tropical climates where bodies decompose rapidly, the smell and sight of the dead is traumatic, particularly to relatives and friends.

Health officials say that is the primary reason to deal with the dead urgently.

“The dead should never be left visible. You collect them, and that’s part of dignity and respect,” said Robert A. Jensen, the chief executive of Kenyon International Emergency Services, a Houston-based provider of disaster-management help and an authority on management of mass fatalities.

David Olson, the deputy medical director at Doctors Without Borders, the Paris-based medical

emergency organization, said its teams of doctors now deployed in the Philippines worry about the emotional impact of the visible dead on their patients, but are more concerned about treating the living.

“The pathogens in the dead either die in the body or are not passed from person to person,” Dr. Olson said. Disposal of the bodies, he added, “is made a priority because it seems like the right thing to do — just to lessen the horror of what’s just happened.”

As of Tuesday, it remained unclear how the organized collection of victims from the typhoon, which are estimated to number anywhere from 2,000 to more than 10,000, would be handled and documented throughout the country. According to the World Health Organization guide, however, it is inadvisable to conduct rushed burials or cremations.

“This does not allow for the correct identification and record taking of the details of the dead,” the guide states. “Nor does it give time for the bereaved to carry out the ceremonial and cultural practices, which would normally occur after a death.”

Dr. Emmanuel M. Bueno, a surgeon who is a medical center director in Manila for the Philippines Department of Health and is helping to oversee medical care in Tacloban, Philippines, said in an interview that the authorities there planned to dig three mass graves on Wednesday, putting layers of bodies side by side with a plastic tarpaulin sprinkled with lime on top of each layer. “We will give them at least a decent burial, with a blessing by a priest,” he said.

The police and other personnel have lacked even enough gloves to pick up the bodies, but more gloves and other supplies are coming, Dr. Bueno added.

Mr. Jensen, who worked on disasters, including the 2001 World Trade Center attack as well as the Indonesian tsunami and Haiti earthquake, said the decaying corpses on the streets of Tacloban, and elsewhere were not surprising to him, given all the other immediate needs confronting the survivors. “In this case, the living is the priority — water, shelter, restoration of services,” he said.

Nonetheless, he said, the authorities there will have to find an efficient way not only to collect the dead but to identify the bodies so relatives can reclaim them, even if the bodies are buried, so their loved ones can at least know that the bodies had not been left abandoned.

“What’s important is a dignified burial,” he said.

Keith Bradsher contributed reporting from Tacloban, the Philippines.

