

Typhoon Mangkhut pounds south China after killing 64 in Philippines

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Victoria Harbour Hong Kong, Sunday

Hong Kong: Typhoon Mangkhut barreled into southern China on Sunday, killing two people after lashing the Philippines with strong winds and heavy rain that left at least 64 dead and dozens more feared buried in a landslide.

More than 2.4 million people had been evacuated in southern China's Guangdong province by Sunday evening to flee the massive typhoon and nearly 50,000 fishing boats were called back to port, state media reported.

Hong Kong's RTHK broadcaster cited experts as saying Mangkhut was expected to be the strongest typhoon to hit the city in decades. The Hong Kong Observatory issued its strongest storm warning for 10 hours on Sunday, just slightly shorter than the record time of 11 hours set by Typhoon York in 1999, the South China Morning Post reported.

In Guangdong, the storm killed two people a few hours after making landfall on Sunday evening and was triggering storm surges as high as 3 meters (10 feet), state broadcaster CCTV said.

Fifteen people were injured in the nearby gambling enclave of Macau, which closed casinos for the first time. The Hong Kong Observatory warned people to stay away from the Victoria Harbour landmark, where storm surges battered the sandbag-reinforced waterfront.

In Hong Kong, a video posted online by residents showed the top corner of an old building break and fall off, while in another video, a tall building swayed as strong winds blew.

The storm shattered glass windows on commercial skyscrapers in the city, sending sheets of paper pouring out of the buildings, fluttering and spiraling as they headed for the debris-strewn ground, according to several videos posted on social media.

The storm also felled trees, tore bamboo scaffolding off buildings under construction and flooded some areas of Hong Kong with waist-high waters, according to the South China Morning Post.

The paper said the heavy rains brought storm surges of 3 meters (10 feet) around Hong Kong.

The storm made landfall in the Guangdong city of Taishan at 5 p.m., packing wind speeds of 162 kilometers (100 miles) per hour. State television broadcaster CGTN reported that surging waves flooded a seaside hotel in the city of Shenzhen.

Groceries flew off the shelves of supermarkets in the provincial capital of Guangzhou as residents stocked up in anticipation of being confined at home by the typhoon, China's official Xinhua News Agency said.

Authorities in southern China issued a red alert, the most severe warning, as the national meteorological center said the densely populated region would face a "severe test caused by wind and rain" and urged officials to prepare for possible disasters.

Hundreds of flights were canceled. All high-speed and some normal rail services in Guangdong and Hainan provinces were also halted, the China Railway Guangzhou Group Co. said.

Hong Kong Security Minister John Lee Ka-chiu urged residents to prepare for the worst.

“Because Mangkhut will bring winds and rains of extraordinary speeds, scope and severity, our preparation and response efforts will be greater than in the past,” Lee said. “Each department must have a sense of crisis, make a comprehensive assessment and plan, and prepare for the worst.”

Hong Kong’s Cathay Pacific said all of its flights would be canceled between 2:30 a.m. Sunday and 4 a.m. Monday. The city of Shenzhen also canceled all flights between Sunday and early Monday morning. Hainan Airlines canceled 234 flights in the cities of Haikou, Sanya, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Zhuhai scheduled over the weekend.

In Macau, next door to Hong Kong, casinos were ordered to close from 11 p.m. Saturday, the first time such action was taken in the city, the South China Morning Post reported. Macau suffered catastrophic flooding during Typhoon Hato last year, leading to accusations of corruption and incompetence at its meteorological office.

In Macau’s inner harbor district, the water level reached 1.5 meters (5 feet) on Sunday and was expected to rise further. The district was one of the most affected by floods from Typhoon Hato, which left 10 people dead.

In the northern Philippines, Mangkhut made landfall Saturday on the northeastern tip of Luzon island with sustained winds of 205 kilometers (127 miles) per hour and gusts of 255 kph (158 mph).

Dozens of people, mostly small-scale miners and their families, were feared to have been trapped by a landslide in the far-flung village of Ucab in Itogon town in the northern mountain province of Benguet, Itogon Mayor Victorio Palangdan told The Associated Press by phone.

Palangdan said three villagers who nearly got buried by the huge pile of mud and rocks told authorities they saw residents rush into an old three-story building, a former mining bunkhouse that has been transformed into a chapel, at the height of the typhoon’s onslaught Saturday afternoon.

“That was not an authorized evacuation center,” Palangdan said, but expressed sadness that the villagers, many of them poor miners, had few options to survive in a region where big corporations have profited immensely from gold mines.

“They were laughing off the police and disaster-response personnel who were warning them. They thought they were really safe there,” he said.

Police Superintendent Pelita Tacio said 34 villagers had died and 36 remained missing in the landslides in Ucab and another village in Itogon town. Rescuers were scrambling to pull out the body of a victim from the mound of mud and rocks in Ucab before Tacio left the area Sunday.

“It’s very sad. I could hear villagers wailing in their homes near the site of the accident,” Tacio said by phone.

Rescuers were hampered by rain and mud, and the search and rescue operation was suspended at nightfall and will resume at daybreak Monday, Palangdan said. Police and their vehicles could not immediately reach the landslide-hit area because the ground was unstable and soaked from the heavy rains, regional police chief Rolando Nana told the ABS-CBN TV network.

Overall, at least 64 people have died in typhoon incidents in the northern Philippines, mostly from landslides and collapsed houses, according to the national police. Forty-five other people were missing and 33 were injured in the storm.

The hardest-hit area was Benguet, where 38 people died, mostly in the two landslides in Itogon, and 37 are missing, the police said.

Other deaths wrought by the storm elsewhere included a couple and their children who refused to evacuate from their house, which later got buried by a landslide in Nueva Vizcaya province. Four people died in northeastern Cagayan province, where the typhoon made landfall.

Still, the Philippines appeared to have been spared the high number of casualties many had feared. In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan left more than 7,300 people dead or missing, flattened villages and displaced more than 5 million in the central Philippines. A massive evacuation ahead of Mangkhut helped lessen potential casualties, with about 87,000 people evacuating from high-risk areas, officials said.

The typhoon struck at the start of the rice and corn harvesting season in the Philippines's northern breadbasket, prompting farmers to scramble to save what they could of their crops, Cagayan Gov. Manuel Mamba said.

- AP