

Video Conference: Tzu Chi Relief Effort in the Philippines

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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The relief effort of the Tzu Chi Foundation in the Philippines has moved into top gear, with a work for cash program involving tens of thousands of people and the supply of 60 pre-fabricated classrooms and cooked food.

On November 29, 60 pre-fabricated classrooms built by volunteers arrived in the city of Tacloban, one of the worst affected areas. Of these, 12 were delivered to the neighboring district of Tunga and the remaining 48 remained in Tacloban. Tunga is the home town of the wife of Antonio I. Basilio, the representative of the Philippines in Taiwan; he asked the foundation to check on the town. The volunteers discovered that no charity organization had ever been there, so they immediately decided to help.

Originally, the classrooms were to be given to the city of Zamboanga in the southern island of Mindanao that was ravaged by a civil war in October and the island of Bohol that was hit by an earthquake; they were pre-assembled by volunteers in Taichung. But, following Typhoon Haiyan, the foundation decided to send some of them to the survivors first. Should they be used as classrooms or shelters? Master Cheng Yen said: "Those already in place should be used as classrooms (to give students a place to attend class). Some can be used as temporary homes or provided to old people, as places to live."

In addition, a third team of 87 volunteers arrived in the Philippines on November 29, to bring more love to the affected area. Tzu Chi has already started a work for cash program in Tacloban, with more than 100,000 people-days. On November 27, the volunteers started to provide hot meals to the old, young and those unable to take part in the program. Each day more than 3,000 people are benefiting from these meals.

On the morning of November 29, Master Cheng Yen was in Pingtung, on the southern tip of Taiwan. Volunteers from the Philippine chapter gave her an update on the relief work there via video conference.

Chief Executive of the Philippine Chapter, Alfredo Li

Alfredo Li, chief executive of the Philippine chapter: "In Tacloban, the members of the city government have given us their strong approval. Yesterday there was a march at the city hall; on the side of the road, we could see the citizens expressing their thanks to us." he CEO had spoken to Master Cheng Yen via video conference, to express his joy and gratefulness in a soft voice.

The cash for work program in Tacloban was praised by those who took part in the march to the city hall and had themselves participated. On the road, you could hear people shouting 'Tzu Chi'. They were expressing the thanks from the bottom of their heart for the foundation's

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support in cleaning their community and helping to rebuild it after the typhoon.

Li also said that, on the afternoon of the previous day, 40 Chinese businessmen from two districts had contacted the volunteers, to ask about the work for cash program and express their concern that the relief would only go to local people. Later they understood that the foundation would help everyone and they expressed their support. Li said: “we held a meeting with them and explained why we carry out the program. When they saw the result of it, they expressed their strong approval.”

The city was devastated by the typhoon; there were many instances of looting. This made the Chinese merchants of the city close their shops and flee to Manila. The work for cash program has helped the city return to normal and businesses start to come back. Shops are beginning to open again. When the merchants saw this, they began to return to Tacloban and reopen their shops, to enjoy the commerce as before.

On November 28, the program was carried out in three places, involving 21,000 people – 8,600, 7,700 and 4,800 respectively. This was a record for a single day. As of the end of November 28, there were more than 100,000 people-days; the whole program has gone very smoothly.

Member of the Haiyan Relief Team , Mr. Liu Ji-yun

Liu Ji-Yu, a member of the Haiyan Relief Team: “we have seen a small number of shops and restaurants reopen. Business is increasingly brisk; this is a good sign.” He asked the advice of Master Cheng Yen: “how do we do the distribution to civil servants?”

The Master replied: “We must respect them. Doing relief means providing it to all those in need. Do you understand this? We must be very respectful of soldiers, police officers and government officials.”

Tzu Chi volunteer of the Philippines, Yang Guo-ying

Yang Guo-ying, a volunteer from the Philippines, spoke about where to build the pre-fabricated classrooms: “yesterday we went many places to see potential sites. Most of the places need some works to become a proper platform. There are basketball courts are ready to be used. Others are laws. We will keep looking.”

Master Cheng Yen expressed her gratitude and said: “I deeply thank you. It is very hard work to run from one place to another. Please take care of yourself. That will do, if the school has place, even a basketball court. We can classrooms for them, so that they have a place to study ... When you find a place and all the materials in place, male volunteers from Taichung will go to help you. Once you find the ground, then they can help you build.”

Member of the Haiyan Relief Team Luo Mei-zhu

Luo Mei-zhu is a member of the relief team; a volunteer from north Taiwan, she is in the function groups of the daily livelihood and food group. She described the hardship she had seen

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and heard over the last several days. Her heart was very sad; she could not contain her tears.

Yesterday the volunteers provided hot instant rice to people in the affected areas. But the number of stoves was insufficient; so the food was set cold and put into plastic bags. On the way, they yelled: "time to eat!" But the homes were dark inside. The number of recycle-able bowls was too few and people were asked to go home and bring their own. But they replied: "when the floodwaters came, they swept everything away." When she shared the stories like this, Luo could not hold back her tears.

In the evenings, the survivors return to where they are living. It is completely dark; some places have a feeble light. There is a feeling of coldness. When she was describing this, Luo said: "how can they live without light?"

Master Cheng Yen replied: "the cash for work program is very important. We do not have sufficient manpower and must not become too tired. We must keep our energy for making cooked food. This supply of meals is very important for them. You need to keep some volunteers to join you in helping "

"When you are there, do not become depress. This was a natural disaster. Everyone must face it more positively." the Master reminded everyone once more.

(Report written on 11/29/2013)