Situation Overview

A 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck the province of Masbate in the Bicol Region at 8.03 a.m. local time on 18 August. Tectonic in origin, the tremor was felt in the entire Bicol region and in several provinces in the Visayas. The epicenter was located five kilometers southwest of Cataingan town at a depth of 21 kilometres (revised from initial 1 kilometre) and was followed by over 50 shallower aftershocks with a maximum of 4.2-magnitude.

Initial government reports indicate one fatality and 25 injured, though numbers are still expected to increase. Towns of Cataingan (population of 55,300), Uson (population of 56,200) and Palanas (population of 26,200) seem to be the most affected. The pre-COVID-19 poverty incidence of these towns has been between 39 to 47 per cent, now the number is likely much higher.

The initial assessments on the impact report of collapsed houses made of light materials and damage to buildings and roads. Water, power and communication lines seem to be functioning.

Local practice of affected population would often be to camp outside their damaged homes to ensure safety of their property and belongings. Due to the rainy season, these people would be unable to remain outside and would return to their potentially structurally compromised houses. Earthquake of such magnitude during a rainy season would also pose a risk of landslides, especially in mountainous landslide-prone regions.

Compounding effects of COVID-19

The province of Masbate has 59 active COVID-19 cases with no evidence of community transmission. Most of the positive cases are individuals who have returned to the province and are currently under quarantine in government facilities. Initial government reports, however, indicate that over 100 individuals currently in quarantine had to be relocated due to cracks observed on buildings in which they were being isolated. Patients from one of the district hospitals were also evacuated for safety measures.

Government response

According to the Office of Civil Defense, local disaster response teams in the province are conducting search and rescue operations, supported by the Red Cross local chapter, the military and police. The Department of Social Welfare and Development made available over 22,000 family food packs as well as non-food items, such as tents, sleeping kits and kitchen kits. The standby fund of US$62,000 (PhP 3 million) could be utilized if deemed necessary to augment the response. At present, no request for international assistance is expected and regional authorities seem to be able to respond to the situation on the ground.

Humanitarian partners

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is liaising with regional and provincial authorities as well as humanitarian partners with local presence on the ground. Initial assessments of the partners to verify the extent of damage are ongoing.

For more information, contact:

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