

Thousands evacuated as Philippines braces for Mitag

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Thousands of people are being evacuated as tropical storm Mitag gains strength, becoming a typhoon as it nears the eastern Philippines, officials said.

Mitag, packing winds of 120 kilometres per hour with gusts of 150km/h, was barreling towards the Bicol peninsula, south-east of the capital Manila, the local weather bureau said.

President Gloria Arroyo was aiming for a "zero-casualty" target from the typhoon which was due to reach land on the weekend, and had "ordered the pre-emptive evacuation of vulnerable areas," officials said.

The army and police were prepared to forcibly move those who did not want to go, said Joey Salceda, governor of Albay province in the Bicol region.

Officials were on alert for mudflows that may come cascading down the slopes of Mayon Volcano as a result of the typhoon's strong winds and rain as well as storm surges that may hit coastal areas, Mr Salceda said.

Evacuation efforts are an attempt to avoid a repeat of a disaster last November when tropical storm Durian created volcanic mudflows that left more than 1,200 dead.

As many as 418,000 people may have to be evacuated for Mitag, although the main priority is some 236,000 living in the most vulnerable areas such as on river banks and in landslide-prone areas, Mr Salceda said.

So far, 26,142 people have been evacuated in 12 towns and cities in Albay, according to figures released by the provincial disaster coordinating centre.

Mr Salceda said the evacuation was going smoothly. "All is well," with no one reported killed or injured and relief goods already stockpiled for those who have been taken to shelters, he said.

Evacuation convoy

At Daraga town, near the port of Legaspi, vehicles including rubbish trucks, flatbed trucks and



Fleeing...so far, 26,142 people have been evacuated in 12 towns and cities in Albay as tropical storm Mitag gains strength near the eastern Philippines. (Reuters: Stringer)

private vans chartered by police were pressed in to ferry residents out, officials said.

"It is the people themselves who are asking to be taken out," said local police chief Superintendent Tony Freyra.

Men, women and children sat on the back of the trucks, clutching bags of clothes, mats and blankets as they were taken to schools which are serving as evacuation centres.

Ms Arroyo cut short a visit to Singapore, where she was attending an Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, and flew home late Wednesday to prepare for the storm.

Another tropical storm earlier this week killed 13 people while six others were still missing after it struck near the southern and central Philippines, the civil defence office in Manila said in an updated report.

Forecasters expect Mitag to make landfall on the main Philippine island of Luzon by Sunday morning.

- AFP

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