

Typhoon Haiyan won't keep us Filipinos down for long



The Philippines is used to natural disasters and extreme hardship. After this latest tragedy we'll come back fighting

Sitting on the Pacific Ring of Fire, the Philippines is no stranger to natural disasters. Filipinos (or Pinoys as we're called in the Philippines), however, are a resilient people. Watching the news I heard that there was no clean water, no food and no electricity. What most people don't realise, though, is that this is the norm for the majority of the country.

Most Filipinos are accustomed to hardship. With 98 million people vying for space and resources, surviving is part of the daily struggle. However, with thousands dead and millions displaced from their homes, Typhoon Haiyan has left us more vulnerable than ever.

The Philippines experiences around 20 typhoons and natural-related disasters a year, with another one to hit early next week, and another four due before the end of the year. Filipinos call them bagyo. I've experienced my fair share of them. Many of the TV images showed people wading through shoulder-deep water, braving strong winds, trying to get by. I remember being eight or nine years old, travelling through Antipolo and being carried across a swell, rain battering the nearby houses, and men slowly trying to drive their jeeps through. Despite the amount of risk involved, they took it on the chin and kept going.

In 2006 the Philippines experienced in effect a civil war in the Bangsamoro region of Mindanao, the country's southernmost island. A Muslim rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and civilian volunteers clashed after the group was accused of bombing the provincial governor's motorcade.

Despite a ceasefire being agreed, 4,000 families were displaced by the fighting. A year later, the conflict hit world news after marines were beheaded while searching for a kidnapped Italian priest. The

priest was later released. The conflict, though, shook the country – but, despite underlying tensions between Muslims and Christians, the people managed to overlook their differences and a peace deal was reached last year.

As if the recovery from Haiyan is not difficult enough, Filipinos are still struggling after the earthquake in Bohol last month, which had a magnitude of 7.2. With the destruction of centuries-old churches, more than 200 people dead, and many more left homeless, one could not be blamed for assuming that the Philippines has been especially unlucky this year.

But we are an optimistic nation. One asset Filipinos have is that they are a people of faith. Their belief in God is what keeps them going through the hardest of times. They are also incredibly generous and giving, as Prince Philip reminded us all when he met a Filipino nurse at Luton hospital. It is both this belief in something greater, and our inherent ability to give ourselves to a cause worth fighting for, that will also see us through this disaster.

This weekend I had a Skype conversation with my aunt who lives in the capital, Manila. She told me that although many people were warned about Typhoon Haiyan well in advance, our extensive experience of typhoons meant that the warnings were not always taken seriously.

In the Philippines, most homes have been built by the people who live in them. Many occupants chose to stay with the buildings that they have invested so much effort in: even with the threat of death, home is considered the safest place.

A friend I spoke to who lives in the Leyte area said that the number of people confirmed dead had reached 500. With so many bodies, a mass grave has been dug. My father lives close to Leyte in Samar province, which is one of the hardest-hit areas. I've tried to contact him but am yet to hear anything. Like many others who have family in that region, the recovery process is proving to be long and hard.

But such a tragedy is not enough to keep us down. Filipinos are used to hardship, and for those who have survived this terrible disaster they will stand up and come back fighting– although it may be difficult – with the resilience that has always shaped us

