

# Itogon remembers TD 'Ompong'

By Dionisio Dennis, Jr. and Pamela Mariz Geminiano September 16, 2019, 8:49 am

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**LANDSLIDE.** The massive landslide in Poblacion, Itogon, Benguet in September 2018 that left around a hundred people dead is still visible a year after the tragedy. The tragedy was a wake-up call for the community. *(PNA photo by Liza T. Agoot)*

**ITOGON, Benguet** -- The mining community here commemorated the massive landslide that killed around a hundred people during the onslaught of typhoon "Ompong" (Mangkhut) on September 15, 2018 with a simple program and a traditional ritual to "silence" the spirits.

"We are conducting the ritual in observance of our cultural heritage in the Cordillera," Mayor Victor Palangdan told attendees here on Sunday.

"This is in respect to those who went before us and for the souls who still hunt the place and the lives of their relatives. Through this we ask for peace and tranquility of our souls and mind that we may live peacefully," Palangdan said.

The local government of Itogon organized the "Pammakan", a native ritual that involves the butchering of animals for offering so that the spirits of those who have passed away would guide the town and prevent a repeat of the tragedy.

Palangdan said after the onslaught of Ompong, the community learned its lesson and that is to cooperate and abide by the instructions of authorities. He said the tragedy in Itogon was a wake-up call for the community.

"The community has learned its lesson the hard way, many lives were taken last year. But because they now know the importance of heeding the instruction of their officials, they voluntarily leave their households when it rains especially those in areas identified by the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) as high risk and no-build zones," he said.

The MGB earlier declared a large portion of Itogon as unsafe, uninhabitable and within the "no-build" zones.

These areas are Barangays Luneta, Loacan, Ucab, Ampucao and Gumatdang.

While an incident command system is automatically activated during a calamity, there is now an organized system that makes officials and resident's coordination more effective and active after Ompong.

"We now have a system of coordination from the municipality down to the barangays," he said.

They have also formed the illegal small-scale mining task force to look into violations affecting the environment.

The mayor said the task force would enforce mining laws within the town and prevent another landslide from happening.

One year after the devastation and the MGB's identification of areas as no-build zones and highly susceptible to landslide, Palangdan said that more than 700 families still needed to be relocated to a safer area.

However, the town is in a quandary as to its implementation due to lack of relocation sites that passed the MGB requirement.

"We are doing our best together with the line agencies to ask for reconsideration to place engineering intervention in other areas, except the no-build zones due to the scarcity of a qualified area for housing," he said.

In the meantime, families have gone back to their residences despite the risk due to the absence of a place where they can transfer.

The National Housing Authority has given the municipality of Itogon funds for the purchase of construction materials and a lot for relocation, on a safe ground, but has yet to find one.

Palangdan said after Ompong, the town suffered when the national government issued a cease and desist order stopping all small-scale mining operations and activities in Itogon and the entire Cordillera region.

With the stoppage order, only areas declared as Minahang Bayan are allowed to operate.

Only one of several applications has so far been approved. Palangdan said he had asked the provincial mining and regulatory board to issue a temporary permit to allow the operation of small-scale mines, which is the primary source of income of residents. *(PNA)*