

A Deadly and Disastrous 2020 for the Philippines

Guilty or not for exacerbating the suffering of Filipinos in 2020, Duterte is facing potentially tougher challenges in 2021.

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A major volcanic eruption, massive flooding in several regions, surging COVID-19 cases, and a worsening human rights situation are among the disasters that made the lives of Filipinos more miserable in 2020.

After more than four decades of inactivity, Taal Volcano erupted again in January 2020. Taal, one of the world's smallest active volcanoes, is located south of the capital Manila. Its eruption covered many towns in ash, displaced thousands in the southern Tagalog region, and disrupted the bustling tourism hub surrounding the volcano and Taal Lake.

Residents were slowly rebuilding their communities when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived not just in the region, but also the country and the rest of the world. **President Rodrigo Duterte** placed most of the Philippines under lockdown in March to contain the spread of the deadly virus.

The government's pandemic lockdown is described as among the harshest and [longest](#) in the world. Critics assailed the failure of authorities to consider how the lockdown, which included the shutdown of public transportation, would negatively affect the lives of millions of workers and small businesses. Activists say that the militarist framework for enforcing the lockdown led to further human rights abuses. Duterte was accused of ignoring the advice of scientists to prioritize mass testing and contact tracing instead of simply herding people into their homes. Despite months of strict lockdown measures, the Philippines has recorded the second-highest number of COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia.

The government's pandemic response was so severely criticized by the public that even Duterte's allies in the Senate signed a letter [urging](#) the president to replace the country's health secretary.

The decision to rely on lockdowns as the default measure in dealing with the pandemic stalled out the Philippine economy, which triggered a record number of job losses. Schools at all levels were not allowed to reopen, commercial establishments did not operate for months, and [curfews](#) starting at 8 p.m. led to business closures.

While many are reeling from the impact of the lockdown, lawmakers hastily passed an Anti-Terrorism Law which the opposition described as a [draconian measure](#) aimed at stifling dissent. It was during this period that Duterte's threat to close down media giant ABS-CBN was realized when Congress rejected the broadcaster's franchise renewal application.

Drug-related killings did not stop even during the pandemic. According to monitoring by human rights groups, *Tokhang* (anti-drug) operations [increased](#) this year. There was also a surge in extrajudicial killings targeting activists, journalists, leftist leaders, and lawyers despite the imposition of hard lockdown regulations in most *barangays* (villages).

Restrictions on the movement of people were being eased in November when five successive typhoons wrought havoc in the eastern stretch of Luzon, the country's biggest island. One of the typhoons, [Goni](#), was the world's strongest this year. The typhoons unleashed flooding, which reached levels similar to the devastation caused by typhoons Haiyan (Yolanda) in 2013 and Ketsana (Ondoy) in 2009. The flooding destroyed houses, crops, and livelihoods in rural communities that have yet to recover from the economic fallout caused by the pandemic. The flooding was blamed on [quarrying](#), logging, and mining activities, which resulted in the denudation of watersheds. In Cagayan province, the release of water by dam operators [inundated](#) farms and communities.

Duterte's absence in coordinating relief and rescue operations was [noticeable](#). Online commenters noted that Duterte was always quick to ask for emergency powers from Congress yet he was conspicuously and consistently absent during the flooding emergency. Duterte retorted that he was regularly briefed about the situation in Luzon while attending other matters in the southern island of Mindanao.

The pandemic tested Duterte's leadership and it got mixed reactions from the public. Supporters cite Duterte's [high](#) approval rating as proof that the majority are satisfied with his handling of the health crisis. But critics mention the inefficiencies of the pandemic task force led by retired generals as a basis to blame Duterte's government for the country's high number of COVID-19 cases.

Guilty or not for exacerbating the suffering of Filipinos in 2020, Duterte is facing a potentially tougher challenge in 2021 as the economic crisis continues to unravel while political parties compete for the support of voters ahead of the 2022 presidential elections. Opposition forces are expected to be more vigorous in pushing for accountability after the International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor declared this month that they have [found](#) "reasonable basis to believe" that Duterte's war on drugs is responsible for crimes against humanity.

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