

TYPHOON BETTY HITS CENTRAL PHILIPPINES.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**, Reuters

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MANILA, Aug 12, Reuter - About 500 families were evacuated today from the central Philippine city of Legaspi as Typhoon Betty, threatening to be the strongest to hit the country since 1964, approached with wind speeds of up to 220 km (140 miles) an hour.

Amado Pineda, a forecaster at the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), told Reuters tropical storm warning signals were likely to be hoisted over Manila tonight.

Danger signals had been hoisted over most provinces of the Philippines' main island of Luzon.

"The centre of the storm is passing close to Legaspi now," he said, adding that the typhoon, dubbed Herming locally, was moving west-northwest at a speed of 19 km (12 miles) an hour.

Pineda said at 4 p.m. (0800 GMT) the typhoon was located over the province of Sorsogon, but would sweep inland to about 150 km (90 miles) west of Legaspi at about 2 a.m.

He said the typhoon was almost as strong as Typhoon Winnie, known as Dading locally, which hit Manila in June 1964, causing damage worth millions of pesos (dollars) and resulting in the deaths of more than 1,000 people.

"Betty is following a similar track and has almost the same strength," Pineda said. "There is a strong possibility that Betty will hit Manila."

In Manila, dock workers scrambled under ominously darkening skies to secure boats and an official said extra moorings were ordered for ships in the port.

As the weather worsened, Philippine Airlines announced it had cancelled flights to Legaspi, the Visayas region and several destinations on Mindanao, the country's second-largest island, because of poor visibility, but added that flights to and from Manila were not affected.

The Philippine Coast Guard said it had cancelled departure clearance for all small and medium vessels on account of the rough seas.

The state-run Philippine News Agency (PNA) said Legaspi Mayor Cezar Bordeos had ordered families living on the coastline to be evacuated to schools and churches in the city's port district after an emergency meeting of a disaster council.

PNA said Brigadier-General Luis San Andres, chairman of the Disaster Coordinating Council in the coconut and rice growing region of Bicol, had placed military units on alert to assist in rescue operations.

Pineda said the weather office expected Betty to emerge into the South China Sea by Friday morning.

He said the storm was likely to generate rainfall of between five and 10 inches (12 and 25 cm) and cause extensive flooding in coastal areas, as well as mudslides in mountainous districts.

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