

At least 50 dead as floods inundate much of Jakarta

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At least 57 people are dead and 365,000 have been made homeless in one of the worst floods in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta in decades. Flooding and mudslides throughout the archipelago, including East Java, Madura, Aceh, Bali and West Kalimantan, have claimed another 90 lives.

Torrential rains began pounding Indonesia on January 29 and continued unabated for days, causing widespread flooding in the greater Jakarta area and surrounding municipalities. By February 2, the floodwaters had reached the heart of the capital, inundating the Presidential Palace and central business district. The city of around 12 million ground to a halt as major thoroughfares were blocked and shops, schools and factories closed. At the peak, about a quarter of Jakarta was under water.

Those worst affected, however, were in poorer, low-lying areas of the city, including the shantytowns where thousands of squatters live in makeshift dwellings. Hundreds of thousands were forced to leave their homes and 114,441 were accommodated in temporary shelters provided by city authorities and various non-government organisations (NGOs).

While many have since returned to their houses, most of their possessions have been lost or damaged and the danger of further flooding remains. Last weekend, parts of Jakarta were again under water after two days of heavy rain.

In East Java, floods and landslides killed at least 75 people in late January. In the worst affected district of Bondowoso, 42 people died. Another 13 were killed in Situbondo and 14 in Sampang on the island of Madura. The main highway between the East Javan provincial capital of Surabaya and Banyuwangi was cut by damage to a bridge.

Damage to crops, especially rice, has been

widespread. Last week government officials told the press that more than 120,000 hectares of rice fields had been destroyed and almost 300,000 tonnes of unhusked rice ruined. The cost of basic goods such as rice and cooking oil has skyrocketed.

Despite the scope of the damage, President Megawati Sukarnoputri's government has refused to declare the floods a national disaster. Welfare Minister Jusuf Kalla declared after a meeting with Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso and five other cabinet ministers: "There is no need to declare it a national disaster. It's just a common disaster." As a result, the major cost of relief will fall on local authorities.

There is considerable anger and bitterness at the lack of assistance from the Jakarta city administration. Most of the temporary shelters were set up and run by NGOs. Much of the food came also came from NGOs as well as members of the public and private companies.

Evacuees complained that the city administration distributed inadequate amounts of rice, instant noodles and packaged meals. In many cases the rice and noodles could not be used anyway because there were no cooking utensils or clean water. To add insult to injury, some shelters were missed entirely during the food deliveries.

"We are feeling cold and tired but we are also feeling very disappointed, neglected and angry," commented Husen, a flood victim from Cipinang, East Jakarta whose home was inundated by two metres of water.

As the water receded it left behind piles of rotting garbage and thick mud, increasing the danger of epidemics. The City Health Agency has recorded thousands of cases of flood victims suffering from influenza, diarrhea and skin ailments.

Much of the disease is caused by the lack of clean water. Only 12 water tankers were deployed to serve

the needs of the flood victims throughout the city. Evacuees are forced to use the floodwaters for bathing, washing clothes and also for defecating.

Police were deployed to guard supermarkets to prevent looting and to keep watch over the city's three main floodgates. In Manggarai, South Jakarta, flood victims tried to take matters into their own hands and open a floodgate to allow the water to drain from their homes. But city official Raya Siahaan ordered that the floodgate remain closed to protect, among other areas, exclusive housing in Menteng, central Jakarta, where ex-president Suharto lives.

Calls have already been made for Jakarta governor Sutiyoso to resign over his mishandling of the situation. He appeared on television and tried to deflect the criticism by reminding the audience that it was the rainy season and that the economy was in poor shape. What was needed, he explained, was mutual cooperation, not scapegoating, to sort out the mess.

Indonesia's Vice-President Hamzah Haz also made a lame attempt to defuse anger over the floods. "It is extremely irrational if the current government is blamed," he told a rally on Sunday. "We need to say this, not as an excuse to avoid responsibility." Haz went on to blame the Suharto regime for the rash of unplanned development.

It is certainly true that rampant urbanisation took place under Suharto with no consideration of the long-term consequences, including increased rain run-off and a higher risk of flooding. According to an article on the *Asia Times* website, some 2,753 hectares of agricultural land were turned into housing estates and 47 hectares converted to industrial use in just four years from 1988-92. Huge real estate developments around Jakarta replaced irrigated rice paddies and small lakes, with some estates being built on water catchment areas.

In the city itself, greenbelts were swallowed up by mushrooming office blocks. Those who benefited were developers, builders and loggers, all of whom had close connections to Suharto and the military. In 1995, Suharto issued a decree formalising the Jakarta Bay Project—a luxury housing development covering 2,700 hectares and encroaching on marshland. The Indonesian Environmental Forum warned that the plan would destroy the ecological balance and cause flooding on the airport toll road.

By pointing the finger at Suharto, however, Haz is

simply seeking to cover up the fact that nothing has been done to remedy the situation in the more than three years since his fall.

International Red Cross official Pepe Salmela pointed out that the floods in Jakarta were the worst in six years despite the amount of rain being no more than average for the time of year. "Similar floods hit Jakarta in 1996 but the damage wasn't as bad because clearer rivers and canals allowed the floodwaters to drain away into the sea faster," he said.

Salmela said the flood situation in Jakarta had become more drastic because the city was growing without proper controls. Jakarta, a port city on alluvial lowland, is naturally prone to flooding. At least a dozen rivers flow through the city and then into the sea. An extensive drainage system, including major canals, exists to prevent flooding but it is poorly maintained and often clogged.

Some 294 billion rupiah (\$US28.3 million) has been set aside in this year's budget for flood control but the money will cover only limited dredging of rivers and improvements to the drainage system. Governor Sutiyoso has now indicated that he will discuss a plan for an East Flood Canal to help protect the city from future flooding.

Yet as the *Jakarta Post* pointed out, the East Flood Canal project was first drawn up in 1973 and has been repeatedly been on again, off again. There is no guarantee that the latest attempt by Sutiyoso to dust off the plans is anything more than a manoeuvre to undercut calls for his resignation. He faces re-election in October when his five-year term ends.



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