

Jakarta's flood victims face bureaucratic indifference and corruption

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In late January severe floods hit Indonesia and inundated much of Jakarta, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless. Weeks later the water has receded but many of the victims are still suffering and lack access to basic essentials.

The worst affected are the poor living in the low-lying areas of the city. Their homes have either been destroyed or badly damaged. They have been forced to use up their savings on food and other basic items. Moreover, much of the limited aid intended to alleviate their plight has been siphoned off by government bureaucrats and sold on the black market.

A survey of the hardest-hit areas of Jakarta released last week found that poverty levels have jumped markedly. In North Jakarta, for instance, the number of poor families has jumped to 37,886 as compared to 29,350 prior to the floods. An article in today's *Jakarta Post* revealed that many families are being forced to live in flood-damaged homes. They have no money for repairs and the reconstruction aid promised by city officials has failed to materialise.

At least 52 people have died of illnesses associated with the floods, including diarrhea, leptospirosis, respiratory infections and dengue fever. Referring to leptospirosis, a disease spread by the urine of rats, City Health Agency official A. Chalik Masulili explained: "Actually it is not a serious disease but it can kill patients if they do not receive immediate treatment. So far eight people have died yet it is easily treated by antibiotics such as penicillin, streptomycin, tetracycline or erythromycin."

At a media conference called on March 3 by the Indonesian Health Consumer Empowerment Foundation, Dr Marius Widjajarta estimated that 50 percent of subsidised and donated medicines for low-income people and flood victims had been sold on the

black market. The foundation had surveyed known black markets for medicine in Jakarta when it noticed that illegal sales had increased markedly during the floods.

Widjajarta said he suspected collusion between officials from the Ministry of Health, the City Health Agency, medicine distributors and public health centres. On display at the media conference were several cartons of antibiotics marked "not for sale Japan donation" that had been obtained on the black market.

To compound the problem, the City Health Agency suspended its 11.98 billion rupiah (\$US1.1 million) program to provide free medical services for flood victims in early March. According to Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso, the incidence of flood-related disease had dropped and "many were abusing the program".

In the Petamburan area, the residents were incensed. Ruminta, a street vendor, whose daughter was hospitalised with diarrhea, said he still needed free-of-charge treatment. "How can they do that," he said, "The administration said it would give each of us 2.5 million rupees for house repairs. We didn't get it but we didn't complain. But they should not suspend the free of charge medical treatment."

Disease was not the only threat. Lack of food endangered the lives of small children and babies who were forced to eat what their parents were given in the city's temporary shelters. Only 6,000 out of an estimated 26,000 babies were given milk porridge and vitamin supplements to ensure their dietary needs were met.

Libraries, schools and school equipment were all extensively damaged in flood-affected areas. The loss of textbooks proved a nightmare, with teachers forced to dictate all lessons. Students and teachers are worried

that the slow progress will affect their exam prospects.

In all, the floods damaged 802 school buildings, many of them extensively, but the city administration has disbursed few funds for repairs or textbooks. A paltry 1 million rupiah (\$US100) has been promised to each damaged school for cleaning but a number of elementary schools in East Jakarta have not even received this small amount. A further 24.5 billion rupiah has been pledged to rehabilitate elementary level education, but no timetable has been set for its release.

Piator Hutapea, principal of SD 07 elementary school in Central Jakarta, said some city officials assessed the damage but could not tell him when any money would be forthcoming. As of mid-March, the school, which is close to the West Flood Canal, was accommodating around 900 students from five severely damaged elementary schools.

The lack of aid, bureaucratic indifference and outright corruption has fuelled widespread resentment and anger. The government refused to declare the floods a national disaster and the official aid was inadequate and slow in coming. Many victims had to rely on support from non-government organisations (NGOs) and a diverse range of individuals.

Much of the initial aid came from volunteers who manned soup kitchens and delivered used clothing to shelters. Medical students offered their services when they heard that victims had to produce a letter from a doctor before being eligible for free medical treatment in hospitals.

In contrast, government officials supplemented their income by charging people for new identity cards, birth certificates and other documents lost in the floods. These were supposed to be issued free but local bureaucrats cashed in on the ignorance of the victims—in some cases charging far higher fees than normal.

A number of reports point to the outrage felt by victims and volunteers alike. Rosida Roos told the *Far Eastern Economic Review*: “The government ceased to function”. Another volunteer Nursjabani Kacasungkana declared. “The state is not the solution. It is the problem.”

Wardah Hafidz from the Urban Poor Consortium said she was sick of official excuses and was planning a class-action lawsuit against the city government with the aim of securing compensation for flood victims and

their neighbourhoods.

Governor Sutiyoso has been a central target of the criticism. His administration has been accused of not only mishandling the emergency but of helping to create it by failing to carry out flood control works and allowing unplanned development in catchment areas. According to a recent poll in *Tempo* magazine, 74 percent expressed no confidence in him.

NGO activists have begun to campaign for greater accountability, insisting that local mayors and governors be elected directly rather than by local legislators. But Sutiyoso is intent on hanging on and getting another five-year term when the post comes up for renewal later in the year.

The *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented: “If Sutiyoso seems adamant on staying put, that’s hardly surprising. Greater Jakarta—Indonesia’s business hub—is a lucrative fiefdom. A glance at the main rivals for Sutiyoso’s job illustrates the city’s eminence: the current head of intelligence Lieutenant-General Hendropriyono, and former regional military commander, Major-General Adam Damiri, are the military’s top picks. With such heavyweights in the running, the NGOs face an uphill battle pressing for electoral reform.”

It would be more accurate to say that nothing much has changed since the days when Suharto and the military chiefs filled all the major posts in the country, particularly those like Jakarta governor that had the potential for lucrative payoffs. The last concern of those in power is the plight of flood victims or more generally the millions of poor who are forced to eke out a daily existence in a city that offers no support or services.



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