

Tsunami death toll in Indonesia approaching 100,000

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Catastrophic is the only word that comes close to describing the impact of Sunday's earthquake and tsunami on the impoverished Indonesian regions in northern Sumatra. As of yesterday, the official death toll had risen to more than 50,000. But government officials are warning that the figure will rise to at least 100,000 as relief teams reach more remote areas, particularly on the west coast.

Aceh, the province closest to the earthquake's epicentre, is the worst affected. The region has been under military rule since May 2003 when Jakarta poured in more than 50,000 troops in an attempt to crush separatist rebels. The area remains under the effective control of the army, which is responsible for much of the relief effort, or lack of it.

The provincial capital of Banda Aceh on the northernmost tip of Sumatra has been devastated. The *Jakarta Post* described the capital, which had a population of 400,000, as the "city of the dead". Much of it has been levelled and there are thousands of dead. But no one is sure how many corpses are still being uncovered. Among those killed were almost all of the 80 journalists of Aceh's only daily newspaper *Serambi Indonesia*.

The *Washington Post* painted a similar picture. "[Corpses] lay along the muddy median strip, unclaimed, unknown. They rested in the middle of intersections and atop heaps of wood and corrugated metal from the shops that once did a brisk trade in electronics, tailoring and groceries... Many were small children, as overlooked as the abandoned stuffed animals that lay nearby."

Only now, with reports beginning to filter in from other areas, is the full extent of the tragedy becoming clear. Much of the west coast has been cut off as a result of extensive damage to roads. On Tuesday, the military finally dispatched an aircraft to over-fly the area and survey the damage.

The large town of Meulaboh, which had a population of 40,000, has been almost completely levelled. A *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist who flew over Meulaboh described the scene. "[I]t looks like the people of Meulaboh never got the chance to run. Picture the bombed Hiroshima—that's what it looks like ... Meulaboh had not

received any outside help or emergency supplies such as medicine, food or water ... We could see tiny figures walking among the debris. They must have been desperate for food and water".

A police officer who left Meulaboh on Tuesday morning told Agence France-Presse that when he left "they only had enough food for a day. I told my men to try to sustain themselves by eating coconuts, but they will only last for another day. I saw residents in the area scavenging for dirty rice on the ground." Sea water, debris, corpses and sewerage have contaminated drinking water in virtually every affected area.

According to a military spokesman, the first six tonnes of supplies arrived in the town via two naval vessels on Thursday—five days after the tsunami hit. A *Sydney Morning Herald* reporter who reached Meulaboh yesterday described the suffering as "unimaginable". Most of the survivors had received no food, drinking water, medicines or outside help and were desperate. Yuda Suria, a father of two, begged: "Please help me. Please. We have had no rice or water for two days. How can we live?"

Estimates of the number killed in the town vary from 10,000 to 20,000. If the surrounding district is included, the figure could be 40,000. As of Thursday, many areas had yet to be reached, including islands off the west coast. A police officer who reached Meulaboh on Wednesday reported that only several hundred of the 6,000-strong fishing community of Calang survived. After a helicopter tour, provincial military commander Major-General Endang Suwarya said 75 percent of the west coast was destroyed and whole communities wiped out.

Many more lives could be lost from disease and starvation unless supplies arrive in Aceh quickly. According to David Nabarro, head of the World Health Organisation crisis team, "Perhaps as many as five million people are not able to access what they need for living. Either they cannot get water, or their sanitation is inadequate or they cannot get food."

Hospitals are overwhelmed by the number of patients. One

of three hospitals operating in Banda Aceh had to turn away victims yesterday. Dr Andalas said that the hospital needed at least 200 more doctors and 600 paramedics, as well as vitamins and basic medicines to treat diarrhoea and influenza. In outlying areas of Aceh, the situation is even worse.

The relief effort, however, is chaotic and limited. Michael Elmquist, UN humanitarian aid co-ordinator in Jakarta, announced yesterday that in the coming days the UN would provide 12 tonnes of biscuits, 8 tonnes of noodles, half a tonne of medical supplies, 5,000 body bags and 50 generators. But the amounts of aid, Indonesian and international, are dwarfed by the scale of the disaster. Moreover, much of the assistance that has been donated is stacked in warehouses, waiting to be transported to affected areas.

At one refugee camp on the outskirts of Banda Aceh, families were desperate for food and medicine, while five kilometres away boxes of supplies were stacked in the military's main air base for the region. Abu Bakar explained to the *Washington Post* that the Red Cross announced through loudspeakers that refugees from each village should delegate someone to receive rice. "They gave us one sack to share among more than 100 people," he said. "How can we survive on that amount of supplies?"

The difficulties facing aid workers are being compounded by the military, which, after launching its offensive last year, imposed severe restrictions on foreign journalists and aid organisations seeking to enter the area. The ban was eased on Wednesday, but Indonesian Vice President Joseph Kalla made clear that no one with "political" reasons would be allowed into the province.

An article in the *New York Times* indicated the frosty attitude of the Indonesian military. In response to an Australian offer to provide a forklift and crew to help end the logjam of supplies at the Banda Aceh base, General Bambang Darmono declared that he did not have the authority to accept the proposal. "Come back tomorrow," he was quoted as saying.

There are obvious reasons why the Indonesian military is not keen to end the entry restrictions. Its offensive was not simply to destroy the fighters of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) but to intimidate and cow the entire population. Despite the heavy media censorship, there have been reports of widespread abuses of democratic rights by the military in the past year, including arbitrary detention, torture and extra-judicial killings. At least 1,000 people have been killed in the operation.

Moreover, the current offensive is the continuation of the brutal war waged by the Suharto dictatorship since the 1970s to crush the rebels. The Indonesian military is thoroughly

permeated with a chauvinist attitude towards the Acehnese. Army chief Ryamizard Ryacudu declared last December: "People who dislike the military emergency in Aceh are GAM members."

There is no doubt that the military's contempt for the local population is a factor in retarding the relief effort. It is probably the only explanation for the failure to immediately dispatch an aircraft to the west coast to survey the situation. The area was the closest to the epicentre of the earthquake, bore the full brunt of the subsequent tsunami and was clearly one of the worst affected areas.

The first concern of the military was not, however, providing aid to the victims, but making sure that the military maintained its positions against GAM rebels. Armed forces chief General Endriatono Sutarto inferred on Monday that GAM might use the situation to launch attacks on army units. In fact, the GAM leadership, based in Sweden, issued a directive to its fighters to cease military operations and focus on relief efforts.

As the scale of the disaster and the plight of the victims became more apparent, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was forced onto the defensive in the face of growing concern and anger in Aceh and throughout the country. He acknowledged that relief operations had been inadequate and promised to speed up supplies. Vice President Joseph Kalla was dispatched to the province as an expression of sympathy. He has since announced that Jakarta will provide more than 10 trillion rupiah, or \$US1.07 billion, in funds for immediate relief and long-term reconstruction.

The nervousness of the Yudhoyono administration is understandable. SBY, as Yudhoyono is known, won the presidential elections earlier this year by capitalising on hostility to Megawati Sukarnoputri over her failure to halt the slide in living standards. His administration's failure to assist the millions who have been left homeless and without basic essentials in Aceh can only provoke resentment.

In Aceh itself, these sentiments will be compounded by the fact that Yudhoyono, a former general who was Megawati's senior security minister, was directly responsible for launching last year's repressive military operations—at a cost of around 7 trillion rupiah. As immediate shock dissipates, the calamity is likely to generate a wave of anger that can only exacerbate an already unstable political situation.



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