

Hundreds die in Indonesia as monsoonal rains cause landslides

John Roberts
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At about 4.30 a.m. on January 4, villagers in Cijeruk, 370 kilometres east of the Indonesian capital Jakarta, heard a deafening noise. Most stood little chance as a landslide then buried 102 of the mountain village's 144 wooden houses, killing probably more than 200 residents. Hundreds of tonnes of mud have yet to be cleared.

The horror in Cijeruk was part of a much larger disaster in Central and East Java. Weeks of heavy rain have caused flash flooding and landslides throughout the region. The International Red Cross says mass evacuations are needed in at least nine sub-districts in East Java. Poor communications and the destruction of bridges and roads make the exact situation unclear but as many as 20,000 people have been forced from their homes.

In the Jember area, 450 kilometres further east of Cijeruk, at least 103 people were confirmed dead late last week and many more were missing or stranded. The *Jakarta Post* reported victims crowded into makeshift shelters as the rains pounded down. On January 5, local officials said there were 6,000 residents in 13 shelters in three of Jember's districts.

The worst may be yet to come. Achmad Zakir of the Indonesian Meteorological and Geophysical Agency says the heavy rains will continue for some weeks in the affected areas. January is the height of the rainy season, which will peak later in the month.

Environmentalists warn that the monsoonal rains are being made more deadly by deforestation and over-farming on mountain slopes and in the catchment areas of Java's two main river systems.

In Cijeruk rescue operations were hampered by a lack of equipment and the unstable state of the only road leading into the village. After the landslide, according to the *Jakarta Post*, 400 residents, police and soldiers

"inched forward" into the mountain of mud, most using hand tools or their bare hands. There were only two excavators and two bulldozers available and the road's condition meant that more heavy equipment could not get through.

Among the corpses pulled out was a mother clutching her baby. No one knew for sure how many were in the houses when the landslide struck. At the time of the 2004 census, Cijeruk had 655 residents. Rescue head Arif Sudaryanto estimated that after recovering 34 bodies there were at least 160 still under the mud. Local police officer Broto Suyatno said rescue efforts had to be limited to mornings and afternoons as it usually rained in the evenings.

Most residents knew the hill above their village was unstable. Survivor Sumarto said that at about 2 a.m. he heard a cracking sound. He alerted other villagers but some took no heed. He moved his family some distance away. At 4.30 a.m. there was a "thunderous sound" as the earth moved. People still in the village had no chance.

The flash flooding in East Java also came with little warning. Victims were washed away as they rushed for safety.

In the affected areas shelter, food and medicines are needed. A doctor in one of the Jember shelters reported seeing increasing numbers of ill people with colds and other diseases. One person was reported to have typhus.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's government has promised funds for new housing. Social Affairs Minister Bachtiar Chamsyah and Peoples Welfare Minister Aburizal Bakrie visited the Cijeruk site and gave out funds. However, the *Jakarta Post* said survivors were angry at the little aid that had reached them. "[T]alk is cheap and flood victims have heard statements like this from the authorities before," the

paper reported.

Of Indonesia's population of 220 million, 127 million live in Java. Environmental groups have pointed to the lack of government regulation and control that has exacerbated the situation for the island's impoverished and land-hungry farmers.

Illegal logging and the use of land for farming on steep slopes were now common. Rully Suwanda of the Greenpeace-affiliated Wahana environmental group told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that destroying forest vegetation and planting short-rooted tea and coffee plants on mountain slopes was dangerous. Greenpeace has recommended that there be no clearing of slopes of more than 40 degrees or land in major river catchment areas.

Suwanda said Greenpeace had identified at least 23 potential disaster locations in East Java similar to Cijeruk. He said the government had to recognise the potential for catastrophe.

The *TimesOnline* reported claims by the Indonesian Forum for the Environment that in the past three years 21 percent of forest cover in Jember had been destroyed. Togu Manurung of Forest Watch Indonesia warned disasters of this magnitude would increasingly occur due to the de-forestation of the past 25 years.



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