

Earthquake kills more than 5,100 on Indonesian island of Java

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A major earthquake struck the heavily-populated Indonesian island of Java early on Saturday morning, leaving a terrible trail of death and destruction near the city of Yogyakarta. Major buildings and thousands of homes have been flattened, rail and road transport disrupted and the city's international airport was closed after the runway cracked.

According to the latest official tally today, the death toll has reached 5,115, but the final figure could be much higher. Volunteers, rescue workers and soldiers continued to search through the rubble yesterday for trapped survivors. The actual number of casualties will probably never be known. The media has reported cases of family members, amid the chaos, simply burying their dead relatives without waiting for official approval.

According to the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent, 200,000 people have been left homeless. Most have been living out in the open or in makeshift shelters of plastic or cardboard. Many have no access to food, clean water and other basic necessities. Persistent rain has made conditions worse.

Rani Indrawati, from the village of Bagulon Kulon, told the *Observer*: "We've got no clean water, no food. No one has come to help us so we're going to eat air to survive." Speaking to *IBNlive*, Budi Wiyani said: "We're short of everything—clothes, food, water, all are gone. We are poor people, but our lives matter." Reporters found survivors scavenging through the ruins of their homes for food and clothes.

"Kopassus [special forces troops] and Indonesia Red Cross volunteers are trying to comb through the rubble because thousands of houses are damaged and people may still be trapped beneath them," Indonesian official Ghozali Situmorang told Yogyakarta radio.

The worst hit district was Bantul to the south of

Yogyakarta, where at least 2,200 people have been killed. Oxfam official Craig Owen told the *Sunday Telegraph*: "Our assessment teams have been coming back looking pale. The centre of Yogyakarta isn't too bad, but there are villages to the south that have suffered 95 percent damage. The hospital in Bantul was swamped with people—they are pouring in with their injured."

The earthquake knocked out electricity to the area. All 12 water distribution systems have been disrupted, either completely or partially. Suseno, a field officer from the Yogyakarta disaster task force, explained: "The problem now is that we are still short of tents, many people are still living on the streets or open areas."

The scene at the local hospitals was chaotic. Patients filled the corridors, the gardens and were lying in rows on cardboard, palm leaf mats and newspapers outside in the street. Doctors warned on Saturday that supplies of basic items such as anesthetic, thread and bandages were quickly running out.

UNICEF spokesman John Budd told Reuters that an estimated 20,000 people had been injured. "Nobody really knows for sure simply because a lot of people were actually evacuated... in order to be treated and a lot of people who are injured have been turned away," he said.

Speaking to the *Observer* late on Saturday, Devi Trisanto, a nurse, said: "It's literally been non-stop since 6 a.m. and we're not finished yet. Most of the injuries are broken bones and chest and head wounds. If I said we'd treated 2,000 people I'd probably be underestimating."

Associated Press reported that at the Sardjito Hospital in Yogyakarta hundreds of patients were lying out in the open on pieces of cardboard on Saturday evening.

Dr Alexander warned that many patients could die of internal bleeding and other injuries, if they did not receive treatment quickly. “We are running out of surgeons, we need help,” he said.

While national and international aid has begun to arrive in Yogyakarta, it falls far short of what is required to treat the injured and provide the essentials of life to the homeless. The situation would have been worse if emergency teams had not already been in the area preparing for a major eruption of Mount Merapi, an active volcano to the north of Yogyakarta. “We just diverted resources to this tragedy instead. Let’s hope Merapi doesn’t blow tonight,” Susi Satrio, a local doctor, told the press.

The Indonesian government yesterday declared a state of emergency for at least three months. After the cabinet meeting, Vice President Jusuf Kalla said that the government aimed to complete “reconstruction and rehabilitation” within a year and promised funds of \$US100 million from the state budget and international aid to repair homes and provide for other needs. He estimated that 35,000 homes and buildings had been destroyed.

No credence can be placed in any of these promises. Nearly a year and a half after a massive earthquake and tsunami killed more than 200,000 people in the Sumatran province of Aceh, many survivors still have no permanent accommodation. A UN report released this month on the situation a year later, found that 120,000 people were “living in tents or transitional living centres, such as community barracks, often with little access to basic infrastructures.”

Indonesian official Ridwan Sulaiman reported last week that only 11,000 of the 40,000 children orphaned by the tsunami had a place in institutional care and many of the remainder had been forced to turn to begging to survive.

Likewise the official condolences of US President George Bush, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Australian Prime Minister John Howard and other world leaders reek of insincerity. Despite the enormity of the crisis facing hundreds of thousands of people in central Java, the US has pledged just \$2.5 million, Britain \$5.5 million and Australia \$2.3 million (\$A3 million). As in the case of the tsunami and other international disasters, whether these paltry promises actually materialise remains to be seen.

Even if they do, the amounts pledged will only allow for the most superficial and short-term measures. The victims will soon face the same levels of poverty that created the conditions for the quake to cause such levels of destruction and suffering. Most of the dwellings that were flattened, for example, were poorly constructed and not designed to withstand tremors, even though the region is well known for its geological instability. Many people were asleep at around 6 a.m. when the tremor struck and the wooden roofs of their homes collapsed.

The earthquake measured 6.2 on the Richter scale, far smaller than the massive 9.3 magnitude quake that triggered the December 2004 tsunami. The Indonesian archipelago is part of the “Ring of Fire”, which roughly corresponds to the borders of the Pacific Ocean and is notorious for its volcanic and seismic activity. Since the beginning of the year, there have been 33 earthquakes of magnitude 6 or greater in these zones, including 29 on the western side of the rim.

Several geologists have warned that last Saturday’s disaster may be compounded by a major eruption of nearby Mount Merapi, which has been very active over the last month. The quake caused a sudden burst of activity, sending clouds of hot gas and volcanic rocks down the mountain’s western slopes. Subandriyo, director of the Merapi division of Yogyakarta’s Volcanology Centre, said he expected increased volcanic activity as shockwaves continued to disturb the mountain. He warned that if the large lava dome that has been forming for months is dislodged, a serious eruption could follow.



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