

Thousands of Indonesian earthquake victims still waiting for assistance

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More than five days after an earthquake struck the Indonesian island of Java on May 27, killing over 6,200 people, thousands of men, women and children are still without adequate shelter, food or water. The quake levelled whole villages south of the city of Yogyakarta and, according to provincial authorities, displaced an estimated 650,000 people.

Many of those affected have been left to dig through piles of rubble for food and materials to make temporary shelters. Senior provincial official Bambang Priyohadi told the *Jakarta Post* that 30 percent of people displaced were still without shelter on Wednesday. The other 70 percent were in temporary shelters, often makeshift, or staying with relatives or friends.

Residents told journalists that they were yet to receive any aid. “We have very little food or water,” Trimoseh, whose house was flattened in Prenggan village, told Reuters. “Until now we haven’t had any aid. But we are not angry, we are just hungry. We will wait for food.”

In the village of Jamprap, thousands of people lined the main roads holding containers and asking for donations. “Please give me something, I’m hungry,” seven-year-old Sari told passing drivers. A group of children standing near Sari held banners reading, “We have not gotten any aid” and “Help us.”

Thousands of people have slept outside in the pouring rain for several nights. Even those under shelter have to contend with muddy floors. According to UNICEF, 40 percent of the displaced people are children and 15 percent are under the age of five. The region has faced 851 aftershocks since Saturday’s earthquake.

Hospitals and temporary clinics in the Yogyakarta province have treated thousands of people with head injuries and broken bones but are overwhelmed with patients. Hospitals are running out of basic medical supplies.

Many people were angry that they had received no help

from the government or aid agencies. In some areas, assistance was coming from relatives and volunteers, but nothing from the government. “We get aid from private donors, but we haven’t received any from the government,” said Mohammad Aziz, 35, told Reuters. Aziz had saved his nephew from the earthquake but lost his 68-year-old father.

Speaking on Jogja TV, Sarmiyem, a mother from Klaten who has lost her home, accused the government of ignoring those outside Yogyakarta city. “Those who are suffering from the quake are not in Yogyakarta only. What we eat here is from neighbours, not from the government.”

Reports are revealing extensive damage throughout the region. The earthquake flattened almost all the 500 homes in the village of Bauran. The *Guardian* visited the village of Slegrengan and found that every building had been destroyed and 24 people killed. Yet residents had received no aid four days after the earthquake.

Given the scale of the disaster, the aid pledged by the Indonesian government and internationally, even if delivered, is totally inadequate.

Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla announced on Tuesday that survivors would be given 200,000 rupiah (\$US21) each for clothes and household items. Families would be given 12 kg of rice and people would receive compensation for lost homes.

The UN reported that “logistical bottlenecks” are hampering aid distribution. Most aid is coming via Yogyakarta’s damaged airport and then being distributed by vehicle on poor roads. By Tuesday, the government has only dispatched six military helicopters to help get aid to survivors.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono attempted to deflect criticism about the relief operation by making a four-day trip to the earthquake zone. He announced that housing would be restored within a year and his

government pledged \$40 million for housing reconstruction. But he designated the earthquake as a “local disaster”, not a “national disaster”, throwing much of the onus for relief and reconstruction onto provincial authorities.

Yudhoyono’s pledges are completely hollow given that more than 100,000 people displaced by the December 2004 tsunami are still living in tents or transitional accommodation. International earthquake aid pledges now amount to just \$US47.7 million, barely enough to patch up the survivors and send them back to their previous precarious existence.

According to official figures, nearly 20 percent of the population in Yogyakarta province lives below the poverty line. Lack of resources and the poor quality of the housing are among the main reasons for the extensive loss of life from the earthquake.

Surono, a geophysicist at the Volcanology and Geological Disaster Mitigation Center, said the large number of fatalities was the result of substandard housing. “The number of victims in Bantul and Yogyakarta could have been minimised had they built quake-proof houses,” he told the *Jakarta Post*. The tremour was relatively minor, at 6.3 on the Richter scale, but it struck close to a heavily populated area. If the houses had been quake-resistant, Surono said, many of those who died would have been able to flee.

Java is well known as an earthquake zone. A government decree requires buildings to meet quakeproof standards, but these are not enforced. But according to Wayan Sengara from the Department of Civil Engineering at Bandung Institute of Technology, “Quake-proof construction increases the cost of a building by about 10 to 15 percent.” Contractors often circumvent the building regulations and avoid the additional costs by paying bribes.

The pittance in aid and assistance for the hundreds of thousands of victims of the Java earthquake is one more demonstration of the contempt with which the ruling elites in Jakarta and capitals around the world regard the plight of the poverty-stricken masses of Asia.



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