

Danger of major volcanic eruption after Indonesian earthquake

Dragan Stankovich
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Since the May 27 earthquake near Yogyakarta, it appears that the danger has increased of a major eruption of Mount Merapi, which lies about 25 km north of the city. Yet, despite the fact that thousands of earthquake victims have still received little government or international assistance, and up to 1.5 million remain homeless, only limited official preparation is being made for what could be another humanitarian catastrophe.

Merapi has become more active since the earthquake, which killed more than 5,700 people, injured tens of thousands and destroyed more than half a million homes. "There have been bigger emissions since the quake; 70-80 a day or every 20 minutes," Antonius Ratdomopurbo, head of a volcano research centre in Yogyakarta, warned.

Last Thursday about 18,000 people were evacuated when hot gas, lava, and ash spewed down seven kilometres from the peak. On Saturday, 43 gas clouds came down the mountain. The next day, lava erupted more than 80 times, along with two clouds of hot gas. Magma reached as far as four kilometres down the southern and western sides of Merapi by 6 am Sunday.

The area around Merapi has been on alert for the past month and most villages located within 7 km of its peak are considered to be in danger from fast-moving bursts of high-temperature gases and rock fragments. In the 1994 eruption of Merapi, more than 60 people perished in such flows, in which the gas temperatures exceed 540 degrees Fahrenheit. In 1930, the volcano killed 1,300 people.

Despite the risks, impoverished villagers began returning from refugee camps last Friday to tend to their fields, primarily driven by the desperation of their circumstances. One villager told Associated Press he was returning because, "My four cows will die if I don't feed them. They are my life."

Most of the returning villagers are men, but some are women. Ngatini told AFP that during Thursday's eruption, "In all the years I have been here, that was the

first time I felt so afraid." But she felt she had no choice but to go back. "What else can I do? I have to work to feed my family." She collects fire wood to boil water for instant noodles which she sells. Ngatini cannot afford a stove.

Other villagers explained that life was hard. They are not allowed to mine sand because of fears of lava flows, and the farming is poor because of ash. Isfandi said, "Everyone one of us is jobless. It's getting hard to make ends meet nowadays."

Authorities said there was little they could do to stop people from returning to their homes. An evacuation camp coordinator in Kaliurang town, south of Merapi, said villagers feared for their property and livestock, and preferred to rely on natural signs rather than official orders in making evacuation decisions.

Last week's evacuation revealed the inadequate level of official preparedness. In the Kemalang district, there was only one vehicle available to transport the population. People had to use their own vehicles, usually motorcycles, or walk down to the nearest evacuation post, from where they had to pay fares for buses.

Scientists have said they cannot be certain if a major eruption is imminent from Merapi, which has been venting steam and debris since May 13. "Merapi continues to spew out a massive intensity of lava and hot gas followed by solid materials," Triyani from the state-run Centre of Vulcanological Research and Technology Development said.

However the centre lowered the alert status to the second highest level on Tuesday, saying the eruption risk had decreased enough in recent days to allow thousands of people to return home. Antonius Ratdomopurbo told a news conference that hot clouds had not stopped cascading down the mountain's slope but they were far from the villages in Merapi's foothills.

Given the ongoing danger, statements made by some

officials appear rather complacent. Mauro Rossi, the European Union's monitor at Mount Merapi, said the 250,000 villagers who live on the mountain are familiar with evacuation drills and can flee within 10 minutes on government trucks and private motorbikes. He said local people had been living with volcanic eruptions for generations.

Yet, the deadly 1930-31 eruption started with tremors recorded 9 km from the volcano, which continued throughout 1930. A strong tremor preceded the first lava flow in November 1930. The strongest flow reached a distance of 15 km along the Blongkeng River. Thirteen villages were swept completely, 23 partially. An area of about 20 square kilometres was burned.

Some officials have argued that an eruption at Merapi might flow away from heavily populated areas. But after the terrible tolls taken by the December 2004 tsunami and the recent earthquake, it is irresponsible, to say the least, not to err on the side of caution.

This is even more so, given that most of the aid and logistical supplies set aside for the possible volcano disaster have been used to assist earthquake victims. The 18,000 evacuated from the volcano's slopes have received only very rudimentary assistance.

The government and some aid agencies have also claimed that a massive eruption by Merapi would not affect the relief operations for the hundreds of thousands of earthquake survivors living nearby. But many earthquake victims have already been left to fend for themselves.

Aburizal Bakrie, the Indonesian minister of the economy, said last week that his office estimated as many as 1.5 million people were living in tents or in makeshift shelters made from debris. The Indonesian government this week dramatically lifted its damage estimates, saying that up to 122,301 homes had been destroyed and 415,169 had suffered some level of damage.

The earthquake now rates as one of the world's most costly natural disasters, with a reconstruction bill of more than \$A4 billion, five times initial estimates. The large numbers of homeless would exceed that of Aceh in 2004, where the tsunami killed more than 120,000 people and left 500,000 displaced.

Mat Cousins, Oxfam's Earthquake Response Program manager, said: "I think the earthquake has caused more widespread destruction than first thought, and the needs of people affected are enormous. It's going to take people a long time to recover from this disaster."

The UN recently warned that while food and medicines

were reaching the needy, a lack of toilets was raising fears of disease. At least 15,000 toilets needed to be built in the affected areas. The UN said survivors needed tools and supplies to build better living quarters as soon as possible. The UN said there was a big shortfall in the quantity of materials supplied.

The shortages have forced people to resort to desperate measures such as living in abandoned chicken sheds for shelter. According to the World Health Organization, quake survivors are not at increased risk of contracting bird flu. However, 36 people in Indonesia have lost their lives to bird flu over the past year.

Most of the people living in makeshift shelters and tents have no fans and little lighting. Many are poor labourers and farmers with few resources to buy food or other essential supplies.

Many survivors with crushed limbs, spinal injuries and other orthopaedic problems face a particularly difficult future. Some people injured in remote areas had to have fingers and limbs amputated after they became gangrenous because of the time that rescuers took to reach them.

Doctors say that recovering patients will have to be discharged soon, even if they have to remain in wheelchairs for weeks. Many have no homes to return to, little or no prospect of post-surgery care, and no money to buy a wheelchair or food.

As in the case of the 2004 tsunami, most victims will never get the assistance they need to rebuild their shattered lives. Many will continue to live in dire poverty. Similar conditions are driving the villagers of Merapi back up the mountain, putting their lives in danger. Once again local authorities and governments around the world are demonstrating their contempt and indifference to the plight of the impoverished masses in Asia.



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