

# Jakarta's flood exposes government neglect and indifference

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Heavy monsoonal rains inundated large portions of the Indonesian capital of Jakarta and surrounding areas in early February. At least 80 people have died, including 57 in the city itself, mostly as a result of drowning or electrocution. More than 430,000 people, above all the poor who live in the low-lying areas of the capital, have been forced from their homes.

At the height of the flooding, an estimated 60 percent of Jakarta was under water, up to four metres deep. Entire suburbs were accessible only by boat. Schools, markets and businesses closed, as much of the city came to a halt. Telecommunications were disrupted. National Planning Minister Paskah Suzetta has estimated the economic cost of the flood at \$US453 million.

While the rich checked into five star hotels, most of the victims crowded into emergency accommodation at schools and mosques. Among the hardest hit were the city's hundreds of thousands of slum dwellers, many of whom live in shanty towns along the city's river banks and canals. The population of Jakarta is more than 8 million and another 5 million live in the surrounding areas.

The city's hospitals were overwhelmed by patients suffering from water-borne diseases. As of February 12, Health Ministry official Rustam Pakaya reported that 190,000 people had been treated as outpatients and 510 more serious cases had been admitted to the already overcrowded hospitals.

Diarrhea, acute respiratory infection, fever and itching skin were the common complaints. At least three cases of leptospirosis, a bacterial disease spread by rat urine, have been reported. Leptospirosis can cause serious illness, including liver failure if not treated. There have been increasing numbers of cases of dengue fever, which is transmitted by mosquitoes.

As residents returned to their flood-damaged homes, many were without fresh water or electricity increasing the number of hospital admissions. The *Jakarta Post* reported on February 15 that 780 patients were hospitalised for diarrhea in Jakarta and six had died from diarrhea diseases. At Koja Hospital, staff had to set up tents to cope with the large number of serious diarrhea cases, mostly children under five years of age. All hospitals reported severe staff shortages.

Agriculture Minister Anton Apriyantono estimated that 1,200 square kilometres of land in the West Java and Banten provinces has been affected, cutting national rice stocks by 370,000 tonnes for February. In some areas the price of rice has already jumped 30 percent. Some 20 percent of the city's roads are badly damaged, disrupting the distribution of fresh food.

As floodwaters began to recede, public anger mounted over the lack of warning, the inadequacy of emergency relief and the failure of long-term flood planning. The *Jakarta Post* explained on February 6 that, "frustration and anger surged among flood victims who had gotten unequal levels of aid". The article cited instances where residents in emergency shelters had been forced to buy food or had gone without for days.

Jakarta governor Sutiyoso has come under fire for failing to carry out essential flood control measures promised after the last major flood in 2002. He is an ex-general who was part of Suharto's inner circle prior to the dictatorship's collapse in 1998 and has been kept as provincial governor for a decade despite his unpopularity. He is due to step down this year prior to the first ever election for the post.

A *Jakarta Post* editorial on February 5 headlined, "Flood disasters are Sutiyoso's unacceptable legacy" declared: "If any head must roll for the poor handling of the disaster, it is Sutiyoso's, and his alone. It is

simply unforgivable for a governor to see two major floods hit the city, and on both occasions leave the citizens helpless.”

Meteorology and Geophysics Agency (BGM) head Sri Woro B. Harijono told the Regional Representatives Council that the Jakarta government was nowhere near as prepared for disasters as at least six other provinces. She said the BGM had warned the Jakarta administration on February 1 that a torrential downpour was imminent, yet it had taken no action. BGM official Prih Harjadi criticised the limited response of the Jakarta Public Works Agency in notifying relevant institutions.

Sutiyoso brushed off criticisms, saying: “This is a natural phenomenon that comes every five years and it may come again in five years. So there is no need to throw insults around.” Of course, torrential deluges are a natural and regular feature of Indonesia’s tropical climate, but inadequate emergency services and the lack of proper infrastructure have created a man-made disaster.

Sutiyoso, who is rumoured as a possible presidential candidate, announced grants of one billion rupiah (\$US110,000) to Jakarta’s sub-districts. However, those most in need—shanty dwellers who have lost their homes and possessions—will receive nothing. “These funds are not for houses built without planning approval or illegally,” Sutiyoso declared.

The national government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, which has helped keep the unpopular Sutiyoso in office, has offered little assistance to the flood victims. A cabinet meeting on February 6 approved minor relief measures. On February 10, Vice-President Jusuf Kalla announced that the national government would provide \$US300 million for the construction work on the capital’s East and West Canals to prevent future flooding.

In 2002, the administration of President Megawati Sukarnoputri made a similar promise to appease mounting public anger over the floods. A plan was approved to build the West Canal and improve the East Canal. Nothing has been done, however, in part because of the high cost of land in the capital, which is in the hands of influential figures. For the East Canal alone, 230 hectares would have had to be purchased.

Vice-President Kalla now claims that the Jakarta administration will acquire the land for the East Canal.

But his proposals appear to be based more on political calculations than sound engineering. Local municipal and regency officials have pointed out that the plans for the East Canal would only increase flooding in the Tangerang area unless other dams and dredging work were completed first.

There is every indication that Kalla’s plans will remain on the drawing board. Jakarta’s chaotic development is determined by well-connected construction and real estate tycoons who openly flout regulations and make huge profits speculating in the construction of shopping malls and housing complexes for the wealthy. Jakarta’s construction boom over the past decade has compounded the city’s flooding problem by gobbling up natural water catchments, such as lakes and rice paddies, and denuding the surrounding hills of trees.

Neither Sutiyoso, Kalla nor Yudhoyono has the slightest intention of challenging these vested interests, to which they are all beholden.



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