

Scores killed in Indonesian Boxing Day landslides

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Major landslides in Indonesia's Central Java province on December 26 have killed at least 70 people and left thousands displaced. The tragedy struck during the early hours of Wednesday morning—the third anniversary of the Boxing Day tsunami which claimed the lives of over 167,000 Indonesians in 2004 after a massive earthquake off the west coast of Sumatra.

Several days of torrential rains caused rivers to burst their banks on Wednesday, flooding areas and triggering mud slides. An estimated 15,000 people have been affected by floods throughout the Indonesia archipelago, including the provinces of West Nusa Tenggara, West Sumatra and East Java.

Those made homeless have been forced into offices, schools and temporary shelters provided by local rescue workers. An unknown number remain unaccounted for, presumed dead and entombed beneath tonnes of earth. With relief efforts hampered by roads cut off by the mud and flooding, the final death toll is expected to rise once the full extent of the damage is known.

An Indonesian government official recounted the tragic circumstances of a group of Karanganyar villagers in Central Java who had joined forces to clean up a neighbour's mud affected house. After completing the arduous task the small community held a late night dinner to celebrate the success of their efforts. Tragically another landslide occurred during the gathering, completely burying 61 villagers.

Seventeen are feared dead after 12 hours of non-stop rain caused landslides in nearby Wonogiri district, about 45 kilometres south of Karanganyar, with Central Java provincial officials describing the flooding and landslides as the worst in 25 years. In East Java rising flood waters swept away a bridge, killing ten people.

Sugeng Triutomo, head of the National Disaster Management Agency emergency unit, said Jakarta

would send supplies to all survivors of the tragedy, while Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono called for a speedup in measures to combat flooding. These statements are little more than perfunctory. The government's callous indifference to the plight of those affected is revealed in its utterly inadequate response to the tragedy.

Rikwanto, a local police chief, told Reuters: "We are only left with basic tools, such as spades and ploughs, yet we face a 7-to 9-metre blanket of mud".

Rescue workers confront the near impossible task of transporting heavy-lifting equipment to affected villages, or of using only their bare hands or simple agricultural tools to try to clear away the tonnes of earth.

Torrential deluges are a regular feature of life in a country where a significant proportion of the 220 million-strong population is forced to live in flood-prone areas. But the rise in the frequency of landslides is a direct result of increased logging and other high-profit enterprises. Inadequate emergency services and the lack of proper infrastructure are other factors contributing to this man-made disaster.

According to Chalid Muhammad, director of Indonesia's leading environmental group Catatan Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (Walhi), the number of landslides has escalated due to the deforestation of the land.

He told Reuters: "For five consecutive years landslides and floods have occurred in Java, claiming many lives. The main trigger is ecological destruction caused by deforestation, forest conversions and chaotic spatial planning.

"There have been no adequate efforts by the government to protect the people from disasters. When the landslides happened officials were on holiday and

there was no access of heavy equipment to the affected areas,” he said.

These claims are supported by the Asian Disaster Reduction Center which has emphasised that while Java is naturally susceptible to landslides, there has been a dramatic increase in frequency over the past three years.

The huge deforestation carried out by timber companies has meant that there is little vegetation to hold down soil during the country’s tropical downpours. Javanese forests now occupy only 18 percent of the land they once covered. Currently the deforestation rate in Indonesia is amongst the highest in the world, with up to 35,000 square kilometres of forest being eliminated per year and 90 percent of the timber being logged illegally. According to one estimate by the Indonesian government, illegal logging costs the nation up to \$US4 billion a year or about five times the annual health budget.

Togu Manurung, from Forest Watch Indonesia, warned last year that since 30 percent coverage was required for ecosystems to function normally, even more frequent disasters in Java were likely to occur. In fact, the ecosystem now lacks the capacity to retain and then transport rainwater underground in natural groundwater systems. Instead deforested regions give rise to surface water runoff, which moves much faster than underground flows. This can either cause flash floods or exacerbate those that occur naturally.

The tragic loss of multiple lives due to flooding is now becoming commonplace in Indonesia. In 2001 a flood in Nias killed 107 people, followed a year later by another one in Mojokerto, Eastern Java which claimed 25 lives. In 2003 floods in northern Sumatra killed 157 people and in January last year, in Cijeruk, 370 kilometres east of the Indonesian capital Jakarta, more than 200 residents were killed in a landslide. At the same time, in the Jember area, 450 kilometres further east of Cijeruk, at least 103 people lost their lives in landslides.

Deforestation, moreover, is not just the result of massive logging operations—legal and illegal—but also of extensive mining. The Mineral Policy Institute, an Australian non-government organisation, recently revealed that over a dozen mining companies were seeking access to protected forest areas in Indonesia. These companies were largely from Australia, Canada,

Britain and the US. Working in collaboration with the Indonesian government, they, along with the timber corporations, are major factors in the growing disasters confronting masses of ordinary Indonesian people.



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