

Indonesian dam collapse disaster leaves 100 dead

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A dam in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, burst early Friday morning, destroying hundreds of homes in the densely populated Cireneu suburb. The official death toll stands at 97; another 102 people are officially listed as missing.

The number of missing persons could be higher, however, as many of the area's residents are believed to be university students temporarily renting rooms without any registration or record. Rescue services spokesman Priyadi Kardono told the media on Saturday that he feared most of the missing were killed by the three-metre wave that crashed through the low-lying residential area.

About 1,600 people are reportedly homeless. An estimated 190 people are being treated in hospital; the health ministry has also reported that other survivors are suffering from diarrhoea, respiratory infections, skin rashes and fever caused by unclean drinking water and cold temperatures.

Many observers compared the impact of the dam disaster with the 2005 tsunami. At least 300 houses were flattened and another 200 flooded; cars, telegraph poles, and other debris were swept kilometres away. Most of the victims were sleeping when the dam burst at about 4 a.m.

Local resident Ghufron, a 17-year-old student, told the London *Times*: "By the time I woke up the water was up to my nose. I climbed to the roof to save myself. I heard people screaming and shouting." A 63-year-old man, Cecep Rahman, lost his wife, his son and daughter-in-law, and their daughter. "I heard a

crashing sound and looked out my window," he said. "The tide was so strong, like a tsunami. They were swept away. There was nothing I could do."

Some of the survivors were women who had left their homes before dawn to go to market; their husbands and children are now among the missing.

The 10-metre high Situ Gintung dam was built in 1933 by the Dutch colonial authorities to contain the Pasanggrahan River. Holding 2 million cubic metres of water, the dam lake was a popular recreational spot for Jakarta residents. According to one report, the dam was kept at dangerously high levels in order to support this recreational use.

The adjacent residential area was home to many workers, and students at the nearby Muhammadiyah University Jakarta, whose flimsy wooden residences were smashed by the rushing flood waters.

"More affluent estates are built on higher land with high walls while homes nearer to the lake are at the mercy of the strength—or precisely the lack of strength—of the dam," the *Jakarta Post* explained. "The poorer households in the area around the lake are only a stone's throw away from those better-off residents, and the surrounding roads are used daily by motorists and office workers heading to and from nearby affluent districts."

Residents denounced the authorities for failing to properly maintain the ageing dam and heed numerous warnings of leaks and structural damage. "We first found leaks at the sluice gate in early 2007," local man Taufik said. "We reported it to Pak Naseh, an official at

the Tangerang regency Irrigation Agency, who controls the lake." There was no official response.

During heavy rains last Thursday, residents noticed growing damage to the sluice gate. An overflowing current of water then began undermining the ageing embankment walls. "By 9 p.m. the situation became worrying," one resident, Mulyadi, told the *Jakarta Post*. "We told people to vacate their homes."

This was at least five hours before the dam burst. Most residents in neighbourhood units (RT) 1, 2, and 3 had evacuated to higher ground, but those in the low-lying RT 4 were apparently not alerted in time. Most of the casualties are believed to be from this area.

"A lot of new homes were being built near the dam," local man Supeje Sugeng said. "I believe that may have caused the earth making up the dam to loosen. I saw water seeping through since midnight. When it broke, it was sudden and it sounded like thunder."

Sodikun said he saw his own home washed away. "Four neighbourhoods consisting of 200 houses were swept away by the flood," he told *Xinhua*. "You can imagine how many people lived there. Most victims lived in the downstream area. They were still sleeping [when the flood came] and nobody alerted them."

Decades of government neglect and underfunding are responsible for the Situ Gintung dam disaster.

Erwin Rustam, of the Indonesian Environmental Forum, told the Antara news agency that of the 184 dams in the greater Jakarta area, just 19 are in good condition, while the rest are experiencing serious shallowing and damage. Shallowing caused by sedimentation has reduced the average reservoir depth from 5-7 metres to less than 3 metres, leaving them more vulnerable to overflow during Indonesia's wet season. In addition, the number of catchment areas has been reduced, placing greater pressure on those remaining. According to Rustam, 56 dammed lakes in the greater Jakarta area have been reclaimed since 2004, with the land used as business centres and rubbish tips.

The 76-year-old Situ Gintung dam was among many requiring major redevelopment. Its earthen wall collapsed after heavy rains overflowed its banks. Public works official Subandrio Pitoyo told the *Los Angeles Times* that had the dam wall been made of concrete it would have withstood the pressure. Even routine maintenance work was neglected in recent years. Janjaap Brinkman, a Dutch water expert with Delft Hydraulics told Australia's ABC Radio that governmental reforms aimed at decentralising authority had led to confusion as to who was responsible for the dam's upkeep.

Authorities have rushed to deny responsibility. Rustam Pakaya, head of the health ministry's crisis centre, was asked whether the disaster was due to lack of maintenance and repair. "No, no," he replied. "This is a natural, natural disaster." Tangerang Deputy Regent Rano Karno added: "We should not blame each other, because this is a disaster."

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, Vice President Jusuf Kalla, and a number of government ministers have visited the site. Yudhoyono pledged to support the victims and to securely rebuild Situ Gintung dam. This display of sympathy was driven by political calculations rather than any genuine concern for the victims; Indonesia's legislative election will be held on April 9 and the presidential vote is scheduled later this year.

The government's contempt for ordinary people was demonstrated by the neglect of the dam's maintenance, the authorities' refusal to heed the warnings of local residents, and the lack of any disaster preparations or warning system.



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