

Earthquake devastates Indonesia's West Java province

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The earthquake measuring 7.3 on the Richter scale struck off the coast of West Java at about 2.55 p.m. local time on Wednesday. As of late Friday, 64 people had been confirmed killed, including a number of children, and at least 100 were still missing.

Fear gripped the country until it became clear that the quake had not triggered a tsunami. As many as 225,000 Indonesians lost their lives when the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami engulfed Aceh and other regions of the archipelago. A comprehensive regional tsunami warning system has still not been completed.

Wednesday's quake affected 12 districts of West Java, with the worst damage occurring in the regencies of Cianjur, Garut and Tasikmalaya. *The Jakarta Post* reported yesterday that the provincial administration has initially estimated that 429 people were injured and 126,130 buildings were destroyed or damaged. Over 2,000 houses, 981 schools, 15 Islamic boarding schools and 2,110 mosques and prayer halls have been reduced to rubble. Rescue workers have reported that 30,000 refugees are in need of shelter.

Many villagers in the affected areas whose homes were not destroyed are still afraid to return. Within 90 minutes there were two serious aftershocks, measuring 5.1 and 5.4. At least 70 smaller ones have been recorded since.

The quake was felt in Jakarta, more than 200 kilometres from the epicentre in the ocean off Tasikmalaya. There was widespread panic in the capital as high rise office complexes shook and had to be evacuated.

The toll of dead and injured was made worse by substandard construction. A World Vision representative, Ivan Tagor, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the lack

of steel in walls and pillar supports was a factor in the collapse of many buildings.

A full assessment of the destruction and casualties is being hampered by damaged roads and local government and health care infrastructure and what many survivors have described as a slow response to the disaster in the relatively remote area.

In the village of Cirangkareng in Cianjur regency, many buildings were crushed by a massive landslide, including a poorly-built Playstation kiosk. According to the *Jakarta Post*, the rescue team at the village, made up of soldiers and local residents, had to work manually for over 24 hours as no heavy machinery arrived to assist.

A disaster management agency spokesman Priyadi Kardono told the media: "The village is in a valley and the landslide buried a dozen houses about 20 metres under. You can't see the roofs at all, everything is completely buried. The chance of anyone surviving is very, very small."

Cianjur government head, Tjetjep Soleh, said the situation in Cirangkareng was probably made worse by illegal land clearing on the hillsides, which he admitted was forced on the villagers by poverty. With the wet season underway, more landslides can be predicted, as poor land management practices are widespread in impoverished rural areas.

As of late Friday, 24 bodies had been found in Cirangkareng and at least 57 people were still missing. Local farmer Robi Suryadi told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that one third of his extended family had been killed or missing. "We know four are dead," he said. Suryadi estimated at least 30

village children under the age of 15 were among those unaccounted for. The bodies of five youth have been dug out from beneath the kiosk.

Voice of America reported yesterday that at least 500 houses were destroyed in the town Tasikmalaya, 115 kilometres from the epicentre of the quake, and one person was killed and 198 houses damaged in the town of Sukanagara.

In the village of Pangalengan at least seven people were killed and 80 injured. Cut off by damaged roads, villagers told ABC radio they feared that help would not reach them. One said: “We have no food... No aid has come so far. I hope the government will help us to renovate our houses here.”

There have been numerous images in the media of people left to fend for themselves. One housewife in the village of Lengkonjiaya took one hour to crawl out from under the debris of her collapsed house. She told journalists: “I screamed for help but no one heard me... I had problems breathing and I couldn’t see anything because I was covered in dust.”

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono declared on Thursday that Indonesia did not need any foreign assistance in dealing with the crisis. Speaking near the devastation in Cirangkareng, he told journalists: “The government has managed to cope with the impacts of the quake using national resources.”

The resources being offered to the devastated communities, however, are a pittance. The West Java provincial government has promised just 90 billion rupiah (\$US8.8 million) for relief aid, while Yudhoyono has pledged only an additional five billion rupiah of assistance from Jakarta.



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