

Thousands feared dead after Indonesian earthquake

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An earthquake measuring 7.6 on the Richter scale struck Indonesia on Wednesday, causing enormous destruction in and around the Sumatran city of Padang. The UN has estimated the death toll at 1,100, while Indonesian authorities reportedly fear that around 3,000 people may have been killed. Thousands remain under collapsed buildings and debris. A small number of survivors have been freed after being trapped for more than a day, but rescue workers report a worsening stench of bodies beneath the wreckage. Further exacerbating the situation, a second quake of 6.8 magnitude occurred 225 kilometres south east of Padang on Thursday.

Rescue operations have been hampered by a lack of proper equipment and the widespread damage to infrastructure in Padang, a city of 900,000 people. A survey conducted by a World Vision team in central Padang reported that three out of every five buildings have been affected, with most suffering severe damage. Water and sewerage systems have been destroyed. Hotels, schools and mosques have been flattened. The hospital that was designated as the main health care centre after an earthquake disaster was badly damaged. Petrol stations were destroyed, resulting in a shortage of fuel.

Scientists have long warned of the threat posed to Padang and surrounding areas by earthquakes, due to their location atop a major tectonic plate fault line. In March 2007, an earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale struck just 50 kilometres from the Western Sumatra regional capital, collapsing thousands of buildings and killing more than 70 people.

In November 2007 Agence France Presse reported: “[Padang] is located between two lines of high seismic activity: the Great Sumatran fault, on the mainland to the east, and the Sumatra trench, a subduction zone under the

ocean, to the west. It is the subduction zone that is of greatest concern: friction undersea between the descending Indo-Australian plate and the Eurasian tectonic plate, which move together at a rate of five to six centimetres per year, is eventually likely to cause death and destruction in Padang, the scientists warn.”

Despite such forewarnings, the Indonesian government and authorities have done little to enact and enforce the necessary building codes to make buildings as earthquake resistant as possible. Public buildings in Padang appear to have suffered the most severe damage, with a large number completely collapsed. This has been attributed to poor construction practices. The *Sydney Morning Herald*'s correspondent Tom Allard commented yesterday: “In Padang the most damaged buildings are public ones, apparently constructed on the cheap with corners cut to line the pockets of politicians.”

The Associated Press added: “The school building’s construction was typical of the region, which is located in one of the poorest countries in the world. Most buildings are not made to withstand earthquakes, and even the tough ones were badly damaged in an earthquake in 2007. There is virtually no enforcement of building regulations in Indonesia, a nation of 235 million people prone to natural and man-made disasters.”

The relief response has been hampered by this damage. An aid worker told the *Financial Times* that deputy provincial governor Marlis Rahman had remarked that “relief operations were being delayed by the fact that 80 per cent of government buildings in Padang had collapsed or were too badly damaged to use”. The newspaper also added: “The figure was much higher than the average for the city and, according to the aid worker, reflected a lack of adherence to building standards over decades.”

According to the *Guardian*, Padang's mayor, Fauzi Bahar, last year requested government funds to prepare the city for evacuation in the event of an earthquake, but was turned down. The lack of preparation is now clearly evident. One problem has been the lack of heavy equipment and rescue technology. At least 11 of the city's sub-districts had no such equipment yesterday, resulting in many deaths which could have been otherwise averted.

Assistance to rural areas outside of Padang—including vital supplies of food, water and medical equipment—has been delayed by collapsed roads and bridges. Christine South of the International Red Cross told the BBC that aerial assessments indicate that “once you go outside [Padang] into the surrounding areas, the situation is seriously grave.”

Little or no aid has yet reached these rural districts and scant information has come in from some of them. No news has been received from Mentawi Island, which lies 57 kilometres off the coast. The town of Pariaman with 80,000 inhabitants is reported as largely destroyed. Many impoverished rural villages with poorly constructed housing are believed to have been wiped out.

In the town of Pariaman, one official told the *New York Times* that up to 80 percent of all buildings in the countryside had been damaged. “Officials had already counted 13,750 homes, 30 office buildings, 69 schools and 128 mosques as damaged, he said, and confirmed 207 deaths,” the *Times* reported. “He said the authorities believed that at least 282 more people still lay buried in landslides.”

The *Australian* today reported growing anger among residents: “Survivors in regional areas accused the government of acting too slowly after Wednesday's disaster, claiming they were ignored because they were so far from the provincial capital, Padang. At the epicentre of the quake, in the coastal region of Pariaman, about 60km north of Padang, a host of injured and shocked people said officials had left them to the mercy of the elements. Tens of thousands of Pariaman residents have been sleeping in cars or outdoors since the quake hit, with many of their houses either destroyed or unsafe to re-enter.”

Health Minister Siti Fadilah Supari have called for international assistance and teams have begun to arrive. No doubt concerned to head off public criticism of his government's responsibility for the disaster response, Yudhoyono appeared in Padang and announced that he would personally coordinate the relief effort.

International aid began arriving yesterday, with rescue and aid teams from the UN and countries including the US, Australia, Switzerland, Britain, Germany, and others. The teams brought search dogs and rescue equipment and technology, as well as supplies such as tents, food, and water. The response has been affected by the recent spate of other natural disasters in the region, including the Philippines' typhoon and South Pacific tsunami. Australian rescue workers, for example, yesterday arrived without specialist sniffer dogs because they are being used in Samoa.

Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla has estimated that the recovery operation would cost at least US\$400 million—a sum which dwarfs the amounts so far pledged by national governments.

US President Barack Obama pledged \$3.3 million in immediate assistance. Other donors include the European Union (\$4.3 million), Germany (\$3 million), and China (\$500,000). Neighbouring Australia is yet to announce a specific amount of aid, though Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has pledged ongoing support.

Such promises, however, count for nothing in light of recent experiences with natural disaster response operations. Five years after the devastating Asian tsunami, for example, there are communities in Sri Lanka and Indonesia still badly in need of assistance. Such neglect points to the hypocrisy of the latest expressions of concern and sympathy for the victims of the Indonesian earthquake issued by the leaders of the world's major powers.



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Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and