

Indonesian earthquake toll soars

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The death toll from the September 30 earthquake in West Sumatra reached 1,115 last week. Disaster Management Agency (DMA) spokesman Priyadi Kardono said the search for 300 missing people had ended and they had been declared dead. Figures for remote rural areas will not be verified until later this week, but Indonesian health minister Siti Fadillah Supari told Reuters that the government estimated the final figure could reach 3,000.

To date, a further 1,214 people have been reported seriously injured. The quake destroyed 133,739 homes, and left 60,831 moderately damaged and 65,492 with minor damage. Also damaged were 20,000 buildings, including most government offices, 2,163 classrooms, 51 health facilities, 1,001 places of worship, 21 bridges, 178 roads and 130 irrigation infrastructures. Thirteen of the province's districts were affected. The magnitude of the earthquake has been upgraded from 7.6 to 7.9.

The extent of death and destruction is directly attributable to official neglect and lack of planning. Governments at the national and provincial levels have done little to enact and enforce necessary building codes to make buildings earthquake resistant. Public buildings in Padang appear to have suffered the most severe damage, with a large number completely collapsed. Most buildings were not constructed to withstand earthquakes.

Indonesia, which is situated on what is known as the Pacific Ring of Fire, is one of the world's most quake-prone countries. More than 170,000 Indonesians were killed or listed missing after a 9.15 magnitude earthquake off Indonesia's Aceh province on Sumatra triggered a tsunami in December 2004.

The epicentre of the most recent quake was about 75 kilometres north of Padang, an area where hundreds of thousands of people live in rural villages and towns. Geologist Danny Hilman Natawidjaja, from the Indonesian Science Institute, said the city itself remained

at risk of being wiped out in the next decade by a more powerful earthquake. "I think Padang is totally unprepared. Generally, the existing structures are not designed to be quake-proof and that's why the devastation is so great," he said.

While aid and aid teams from some 20 countries have arrived in Padang, help has been slow to reach more remote inland areas, with landslides cutting off many roads. The DMA reports that 198,200 households still need emergency shelter.

More than 600 people are believed to have died in the hillside hamlets of Padang Pariaman. At least six entire villages have been wiped out. The force of the quake gouged out mountainsides and dumped tonnes of mud, boulders and trees, burying hundreds of people alive. Rescuers found homeless survivors desperate for food, water and shelter.

An official said three hamlets wiped out by landslides on the foothills of the Gunung Tigo mountain would be turned into mass graves. "Instead of the extra cost of evacuating the corpses, it's better to allocate the money for the living," Ade Edward, the head of the West Sumatra earthquake coordinating desk, told *Kompas*.

Many locals felt that aid was bypassing them. "People are so angry here they have stopped the aid trucks asking why they are sending aid to villages where so many are dead," one of the villagers told the *Jakarta Post*. A resident with a 10-day-old infant in Pasa Dama, a village outside Padang, said all he had eaten in a day was a packet of instant noodles. "All of us are hungry. We hear on the radio very nice words that aid is pouring in, but where is it?" he asked.

In Sikabu village, in the foothills of Padang Pariaman, all 2,000 homes were either badly damaged or destroyed. "All our belongings have gone ... no one has come up to

see us,” said Akhrudin, a grandfather watching family members remove smashed bricks and buckled iron roofing from his home. His granddaughter died in the house next door and seven other family members were injured. “We have no shelter, all we have is some noodles and eggs,” he told the *Jakarta Post*.

Padang’s hospitals, many of them badly damaged, remain under great stress. Dr Yan Fernandez, who is working in a mobile medical team supporting victims in the Pariaman district, said that rather than improving, people’s health was deteriorating.

Medical authorities are battling to contain outbreaks of diarrhoea and dengue fever, and are in desperate need of specialist equipment. Gde Yogadhita, the World Health Organisation’s emergency field operations manager, said 10 percent of the region is still without a local health clinic. “There has been no widespread outbreak of disease yet, but we are seeing more cases of diarrhoea and dengue fever,” he said, adding people were also suffering from tetanus and respiratory infections.

Matt Eckersley, an Australian doctor in Padang, said more specialists, such as burns experts, were needed. “We have only two nurses per 50 people, and they are the same nurses who have been here since the beginning. They are exhausted,” he told Associated Press. Relief coordinator Ade said there was enough medicine for the coming week but it would soon run out.

As of last week, more than 3,000 injured people still needed treatment. Ade said more medical workers were desperately needed. Survivors would be at greater risk of contracting upper respiratory tract infections and diarrhoea over the next two weeks, which would put a further strain on medical staff.

Children are particularly vulnerable. Jon Bugge, a spokesman for Save the Children, which has been delivering tarpaulins, plastic sheeting and water purifying tablets, said the biggest threat to children now was illness due to dirty water and trauma.

A researcher from Andalas University, Syafruddin Karimi, said the quake had virtually crippled the local economy. West Sumatra is expected to need at least 20 trillion rupiah (\$US2.1 billion) to restore its economy. At this stage, the government has only allocated about 6

trillion rupiah to the province. Offices, hotels, stores and shopping malls were badly damaged, causing hundreds of people to lose their jobs.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has declared a two-month state of emergency, but ordinary people are receiving a pittance in aid. The DMA has asked the government to pay the families of the dead roughly \$US250, while the homeless will get just 50 cents a day for up to a month. Local governments have not decided how much aid will be allocated to assist rebuilding homes. However, authorities have already warned the amount may not be the same as other disasters.

The UN has launched a \$US38 million appeal to pay for shelter, restoration of water facilities, disease prevention and other urgent humanitarian needs. UN agencies, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and 18 non-governmental organisations are requesting funds for 74 humanitarian projects. However, these measures are likely to be grossly inadequate.

Scientists investigating the earthquake warn it was not the “big one” they have long been forecasting for Padang. Sri Widiyantoro, a geophysicist from the Bandung Institute of Technology, said the region is likely to face a much more powerful earthquake in coming years.

Far from drawing any lessons from the latest disaster, no steps will be taken to prepare for further earthquakes once the immediate publicity surrounding the present crisis has passed.



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