

Hundreds dead after two Indonesian disasters

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The remote Mentawai islands off the west coast of Sumatra were devastated on Monday night after a 7.7 magnitude undersea earthquake triggered a tsunami that swept across coastal areas. Poor weather has hampered efforts to assess the extent of the damage and to get relief supplies to the islands.

West Sumatra's disaster management agency coordinator, Ade Edward, reported yesterday that at least 311 people were dead and another 410 were missing. However, the final toll could be much higher as rescue workers are yet to reach some of the worst-affected areas. The tsunami wave was at least 3 metres high and swept up to 600 metres inland.

The National Disaster Management Agency said most deaths had occurred in the Pagai Utara and Pagai Selatan districts. Hundreds of wooden and bamboo homes had been washed away in more than 20 villages. More than 20,000 people have been displaced and are sheltering in makeshift emergency camps or staying with friends and relatives.

Dave Jenkins, founder of the aid agency Surf Aid, told the media: "It's a lot more serious than we thought at the beginning. Of the coast villages that faced the epicentre, probably 50 to 60 percent have been affected and lots of them have just been wiped out. There's a lot of destruction and there's a lot of people who aren't being treated."

Reaching the Mentawai islands from western Sumatra involves a boat trip of at least 10 hours. A break in the bad weather enabled a cargo plane loaded with tents, medicine, food and clothes to land yesterday afternoon. Four helicopters were also able to land at the North Pagai island town of Sikakap, which has been designated as the centre for relief operations.

The first photos from North Pagai showed trees flattened and buildings badly damaged with broken walls. According to World Vision project manager Ita Balanda, at least 7,900 families had been affected. Many had lost their homes, which were simply swept away. Surf Aid official Andrew Judge said: "[The] limited hospital services are overwhelmed."

Images from the village of Muntei Baru-Baru showed dozens of bodies, including those of women, young children and babies, laid out in the open. Eloi Bonas, a consultant with Caritas Fund, reported that in Peurogat, a village of 104 families, 38 people were dead and 15 missing. In the village of Beleerakso, 18 people were dead and 4 missing. Henri Doro Satoko, head of the Mentawai Islands parliament, told CNN that at least one village with a population of 200 had been swept away, with only 40 people recovered.

None of the victims received any warning of the impending danger. Six years after a tsunami devastated much of northern Sumatra, as well as large areas of Thailand, Sri Lanka and India, and killed an estimated 225,000 people, a tsunami early warning system is still incomplete.

Ferdinand Salamanang, who lives on North Pagai Island, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: "There wasn't any siren to warn people in Sikakap. Yes there was an earthquake and tsunami detection system in our port, but it is broken. We did not hear any warning this time."

Ridwan Jamaluddin, from the Indonesian Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology, told the media: "We don't say they [two early warning buoys] are broken down, but they were vandalised and

the equipment is very expensive. It cost us five billion rupiah [\$US560,000] each.”

Responsibility for the lack of a functioning tsunami warning system rests not just with the Indonesian government but with the major powers that pledged to establish a region-wide system in the aftermath of the 2004 tragedy. UN disaster specialist Tiziana Bonapace told the BBC that the warning system was meant to be finished in 2010 but was still a work in progress. “Earthquake and sea-level monitoring systems are in place, but what has proven more difficult is how to get warnings out to remote areas in time,” she said.

Ridwan Jamaluddin dismissed the lack of warning, claiming that even if the buoys had been working the alert might not have given people enough time to escape. “Pagai Island is very close to the epicentre, so the waves reached Pagai Island in just 5 or 10 minutes,” he said. Whether these claims are true or not, the official gave no indication as to when the buoys were going to be fixed and the warning system restored.

The Mentawai islands were devastated just three years ago by a series of earthquakes in September 2007. Nearly a thousand homes were destroyed, along with infrastructure such as roads and bridges. The island group is isolated and economically backward, relying on logging and tourism.

Even as relief workers struggle to cope with the situation in the Mentawai Islands, another disaster is unfolding in central Java following the eruption of Mount Merapi on Tuesday. At least 29 people are dead and 38 injured. About 42,000 people had been evacuated following earlier warnings, but a number of people, concerned about their crops, homes and possessions, returned to the area or refused to leave.

Scientists are concerned about further eruptions. The head of the Indonesia’s centre of vulcanology, Surono, told the *Guardian*: “A lot of energy is pent up back there. There’s no telling what’s next.” Large areas around the volcano are caked in ash. Mount Merapi, to the north of the city of Yogyakarta, is one of Indonesia’s most active volcanoes, but the surrounding area is densely populated.

In the wake of the disasters, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono cut short his visit to Vietnam where he was due to attend the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit that starts today. While designed to make a show of support for the victims, his return will make no difference to the limited relief operations or the long term uncertainty and want facing people in both areas. Yudhoyono’s visit is likely to be brief. As he explained: “God willing I will return to attend the summit and accept the [ASEAN] chairmanship from Vietnam to Indonesia.”



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