

Indonesia: Inadequate relief endangers disaster victims

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Relief workers in Indonesia are struggling to cope with two disasters involving tens of thousands of people—the October 25 tsunami that devastated villages in the Mentawai islands off the west coast of Sumatra and the ongoing volcanic eruptions from Mount Merapi in central Java. In both cases, the government's inadequate aid efforts have come under criticism.

At this stage, the death toll in the Mentawai island chain is far higher than from the volcanic activity in Java. Whole villages were swept away by waves at least three metres in height. As of Monday, the official death toll had reached 449, and another 96 people are missing. More than 14,000 people are homeless, with many lacking basic necessities.

A report in the London-based *Times* yesterday was scathing. Reporting from Sikakap, the centre of aid operations in the island group, the article stated: "Scores of villages were still without food or medicine a week after the tsunami. Some people with only superficial wounds died after their untreated injuries became infected. Doctors who hiked for kilometres to assist them said many more with only minor wounds were only days away from death for the want of antibiotics."

The newspaper reported that aid supplies were rotting on the docks at Padang in West Sumatra and some of the aid packages dropped from helicopters had fallen into the sea. An army officer told Indonesian television that the military had been restricted in providing boats and helicopters because of a shortage of fuel.

Anger is growing among survivors. The *Jakarta Post* reported that Baleraksok village in the South Pagai district received its first aid on Saturday, dropped from a helicopter, six days after the tsunami. One villager said:

"Last night, the supplies that were dropped were just mineral water, several boxes of instant noodles and sardines." There was no rice, sugar or other basic commodities, and the quantities were inadequate for the 183 families in the area.

Perholongan Senaga arrived in Sikakap on Monday in his own boat and loaded it up with all the food, water and blankets he could carry. He told Agence France Presse (AFP) that the 250 people in his village in North Pagai were surviving on wild bananas and roots, but the supply was exhausted. People were becoming sick from drinking from a river contaminated with corpses. Three to five families were crowding into each makeshift shelter. "It's been a week, why hasn't there been any help?" he exclaimed.

Associated Press reported on October 31 that hospital doctors in Sikakap urgently needed medical supplies to deal with 150 injured people who had arrived. Dr Alyssa Scurrah from Sydney reported that the hospital was in desperate need of a generator, antibiotics and a chest drain. She described the case of a 12-year-old girl who had needed urgent evacuation to Padang for surgery.

Indonesian officials have blamed the delays on bad weather. However, Khalid Saifullah, a coordinator for local non-government aid agencies, told the media that the authorities were caught unprepared for the disaster. He said bad weather had been a challenge, but the "delays were due to inadequate preparation".

Speaking to the *Times*, West Sumatra Disaster Management Agency spokesman Wahyu dismissed complaints about the lack of aid. "I'm not saying the villagers are lying but how do I know you are telling the truth?" he said. He claimed that relief helicopters were

delivering food “door to door”.

Government officials are taking their cue from President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono who told a cabinet meeting that officials should ignore criticisms of the relief effort. “I was informed... that there have been criticism and comment. I say don’t worry about all that. It always happens. There are people who give direct help, and there are also many who criticise and forget to help.”

In later comments, Yudhoyono hinted that the villagers were to blame for their plight. He declared that the “only long term solution” for the tsunami survivors was to move away from vulnerable coastal areas. He did not elaborate how or where the villagers could move or how they were going to eke out a living.

In addition to the lack of aid supplies, the government is yet to explain the failure of its tsunami warning system to alert villagers to the dangers. Officials first blamed vandalism of several tsunami detection buoys. An alternative excuse was then circulated that there was not time to issue an alert as the islands were too close to the epicentre of the undersea earthquake.

Construction was started on the warning system after catastrophic 2004 tsunami that killed an estimated 170,000 Indonesians in northern Sumatra. Six years later, it has still not been completed. There is no communication system in place to transmit warnings to many of the isolated and vulnerable villages in the island groups. Even a warning of a few minutes could have made a significant difference to the death toll.

Whatever the exact reason for the failure of the warning system, the official complacency indicates that the present tragedy will only be repeated in the future. The Mentawai and neighbouring island groups as well as the Sumatran mainland are all vulnerable to tsunamis caused by quakes from a nearby, major geological fault line.

Amid considerable media coverage, Yudhoyono returned to Indonesia from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Hanoi on October 26 to demonstrate concern for the victims of the tsunami and volcano. His main preoccupation was to minimise the political damage to his administration. He then quietly returned to Hanoi in order not to miss the remainder of the summit that concluded on Saturday.

Yudhoyono was due to visit the victims of the Mt Merapi eruptions yesterday. Around 65,000 people have been evacuated from the immediate danger zone at the base of the volcano and placed in badly crowded and under-resourced camps. According to the National Disaster and Mitigation agency, only 99 shelters have been provided.

One evacuee told Reuters: “It is a difficult situation for us. I wish the government would pay more attention to us. Provide shelter and food for us.” Speaking to AFP, a field coordinator, Widi Sutikno, said some of the people in makeshift camps had been suffering from respiratory illnesses. “None of them suffer from any chronic illness so far,” he said.

The death toll from the initial eruption of hot ash and gases last week was 38. Volcanic activity has continued, with one government volcanologist predicting that the eruptions “could go on for weeks, even months”. As a result, tens of thousands of evacuees will be completely dependent on limited government aid.

After having initially refused international aid for the victims of the twin disasters, Yudhoyono told the ASEAN meeting on Saturday that his government would accept foreign reconstruction assistance. While any aid will be welcomed by those struggling to survive, donors provide disaster assistance primarily to further their own economic and strategic agendas. Six years after the 2004 tsunami, the international promises to build a regional warning system have still not been realised.



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