

Floods kill 21 in Indonesian capital

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26 January 2013

Floodwaters began to recede in Jakarta early this week, following monsoonal rains on January 16 and 17 that put much of the city under two metres of water. Additional heavy rainfalls are expected, however, and the monsoon season will continue until February.

At least 21 people have been killed by drowning and electrocution. Jakarta Governor Joko Widodo declared a state of emergency until January 27 for the city of 14 million people. Around 250,000 residents were directly affected by the flooding and at least 50,000 were made homeless. Tens of thousands of people sought refuge in makeshift centres or in shopping malls and other spaces provided by private businesses.

As of mid-week, hundreds of thousands of people remained without clean drinking water or electricity. The situation threatens disease outbreaks, which developed as a major danger during the last Jakarta flood in January 2007.

A section of the West Flood Canal collapsed on January 17, inundating the Indonesian capital's central business district. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was forced to stand in water up to his shins at the presidential palace as he greeted Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on her state visit.

Last week the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce reported that 300 factories in East Jakarta were closed due to power failures and employees unable to report to work. The economic cost of the flooding is estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

Both Yudhoyono and Widodo promised that government help for flood victims would receive top priority. Yudhoyono declared: "I have no problem with the palace being flooded. The most important thing is the people are protected."

In reality, as in 2007 and the previous major flood in 2002, government aid has failed to reach many of the worst affected people.

Gustida **Bukhari** told *Post* the 19 that around 1,400 residents in her neighbourhood, located only 500 metres from the city's main thoroughfare, had received no assistance. Residents had set up a public kitchen, without any assistance from the authorities. "We have received no food, no clean water and no medical help from the government," she told the *Post*. "We have to struggle to provide our basic needs ourselves."

Hundreds of flood victims spent several days in the lower floors of the Grand Indonesia shopping mall, where management provided food and clothing.

West Jakarta resident Rachmat Nasution told the UN's IRIN news website on January 21 that after two days of flooding in his area, no help had arrived. "Families have been trapped in their houses, which are flooded as high as the neck," he explained.

Last Saturday, Governor Widodo refused to directly answer reporters' questions as to whether the city government had enough basic supplies for flood victims. He admitted, however, that cash provided to the city's agencies had been slow, affecting aid supplies. "There's a possibility they have run out," he said. "They probably have."

Authorities have taken advantage of the disastrous flooding to forcibly relocate many of Jakarta's most impoverished residents.

On Wednesday, in a meeting with the city's five mayors, and district and sub-district leaders, Widodo discussed the removal of squatters who live along the city's riverbanks and embankment. He reportedly told the officials to use "a soft approach" to evict the squatters. "We have to do it nicely, using dialogue to explain to them that living on riverbanks is in violation of the bylaw, and so on," he declared. But, according to the *Jakarta Post*, he told the meeting that if this did not work, he "would lend a hand" to impose harsher measures.

The district officials were enthusiastic about these plans. East Jakarta mayor H.R. Krisdianto explained: “This is the perfect time to start informing the residents affected by the floods about the relocation. They are traumatised by the floods so it is likely that they will easily accept the idea of relocating.”

The squatters are among the worst affected by the city’s flooding. Families are forced into these areas by poverty and the high cost of land in Jakarta, where politically-connected developers use up the best land for shopping malls and housing for the wealthy. Where environmental and other regulations exist, they are often ignored, resulting in construction projects being developed over natural rainwater runoff areas, such as lakes and rice paddies. Along with the deforestation of hills around the city, particularly to the north, the anarchic development of Indonesia’s capital has exacerbated the destructive impact of the annual monsoonal downpours.

National and city governments have neglected flooding infrastructure. About 40 percent of Jakarta is below sea level, and it is crisscrossed by 13 rivers and 1,400 kilometres of man-made waterways. Many are clogged with rubbish, contributing further to flooding.

Governor Widodo has now pledged to fix the city’s rivers and dredge the lakes and dikes. Similar promises were made in 2007. Since then, the East Flood Canals system has been completed, along with some construction of sea barriers. But the work is piecemeal. A year ago the World Bank issued an “urgent flood mitigation report,” urging the dredging of the city’s floodways and canals. A year later, nothing has been done, apart from some preliminary work.

Speaking on behalf of international investors, the *Financial Times* noted this week that water rushing into Jakarta’s “newest and sleekest office towers” demonstrated “the woeful state of Indonesia’s infrastructure.” Its appeal for better infrastructure is entirely geared to business interests, rather than the wellbeing and safety of ordinary residents.



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