

# Indonesian volcanic eruption displaces tens of thousands

**Oliver Campbell**  
17 February 2014

A major eruption of Mount Kelud, a volcano in eastern Java, Indonesia, has resulted in four confirmed deaths, and displaced tens of thousands of villagers who live in surrounding areas.

The eruption began on Thursday night, local time, and plumes of volcanic ash and debris continued to pour from the crater on Friday. Experts reported as of Saturday, that while minor tremors continued, the risk of another major eruption had subsided.

Some 200,000 people live in 36 villages within a ten kilometre radius of the mountain, largely living off subsistence crops grown in the region's fertile volcanic soil. Although the volcano had been "rumbling" for weeks prior to the eruption, residents in the immediate vicinity were reportedly only told to evacuate their homes late Thursday, with authorities raising the alert to the highest level 90 minutes before the eruption.

While only four deaths have been confirmed, some news reports have indicated that six people have died as a result of the eruption. Among those who perished were three elderly villagers, including a 97-year-old woman, when the roofs of their homes collapsed under the weight of ash and volcanic debris. A 70-year-old man, waiting for assistance to be evacuated died after being struck by a collapsing wall.

Villagers reported scenes of chaos and widespread destruction. Ratno Pramono, a 35-year-old farmer from the village of Sugihwaras, around five kilometres from the crater, told Associated Press (AP): "The eruption sounded like thousands of bombs exploding. I thought doomsday was upon us. Women and children were screaming and crying."

As many as 100,000 residents were evacuated from the area. It is unclear how many of them were provided accommodation in makeshift centres. This has led to fears of food and water shortages, along with the

danger of an outbreak of disease.

Many of the evacuation centres lack basic supplies. The *Jakarta Post* reported that there was no milk or baby food available. One mother, Rukiyah, told the newspaper: "I am also running out of milk for my baby because I did not have the chance to stock up when we evacuated. Neither do I have the money to buy milk for my baby."

Soldiers have been stationed around villages in the immediate vicinity of the volcano, forming a 10 kilometre "exclusion zone" in an attempt to prevent anxious villagers returning to tend to their crops and livestock, and assess the damage to their homes and property.

Marjito, a farmer attempting to return to his village about 5 kilometres from the volcano told AP: "Our cows need to be milked. If they aren't, they can get sick and die."

His wife, Dinayah said: "We have so much work to do, including running and hiding from security officers."

Another farmer explained that he felt he had to return to his property because of inadequate government assistance. "I don't see why we have to stay longer at the evacuation centre when we still have our livestock to feed," Tukiman, 54, told the *Jakarta Post*. "There is no guarantee that the government will pay us compensation if they die due to starvation."

According to the national disaster agency, the eruption sent millions of cubic metres of debris into the atmosphere. The streets of Keridi, a normally busy town around 39 kilometres from the volcano, were deserted, with residents reporting major air pollution. "The smell of sulfur and ash hung so thickly in the air that breathing was painful," Insaf Wibowo, a resident of Keridi, told AP.

Ash and debris travelled hundreds of miles from the volcano, reducing visibility to as little as three to four metres in the days following the eruption in the provinces of Yogyakarta, Klaten and Surakarta in central Java. This triggered major traffic problems.

Java's seven airports were closed following the eruption, including the Juanda international airport in Surabaya, Indonesia's second largest city. Flights were beginning to resume on Saturday.

The islands of the Indonesian archipelago are some of the most volcanically active in the world. Sitting within the "Ring of Fire," the area around the basin of the Pacific Ocean, the islands are prone to high levels of seismic activity. There are 130 active volcanoes in Indonesia. Nineteen of them have been placed on an "alert level" by national disaster authorities, the second highest warning for threatened volcanic activity.

Mount Sinabung, located in the western island of Sumatra, has been emitting ash and volcanic material on an almost daily basis over the past three months. The largest recent eruptions occurred at the beginning of the month, with ash clouds raining down on villages near the mountain, killing 14 people, including four high school children.

The bodies were found in the village of Suka Meriah, within a three-mile exclusion zone surrounding the crater. Reports indicate that numbers of people within the zone have returned to their homes, having spent weeks in makeshift evacuation centres, prompting authorities to deny reports that they have given permission for residents to return.

The protracted volcanic activity has raised fears of an internal refugee crisis, with Mount Sinabung's eruptions displacing almost 30,000 residents. Many of the displaced are reportedly sleeping on floor mats in churches and mosques with limited access to water for bathing and hygiene.

According to an article in *Asia News*, a district spokesman, Jhonson Tarigan said that local authorities are heavily dependent on national authorities, and donations from companies and private individuals. He voiced concern that if the number of displaced residents continues to rise, supply shortages may ensue. The ongoing plight of those affected by Mount Sinabung's eruptions indicates that government authorities will do little to address the crisis confronting the tens of thousands affected by the latest eruption in Java.

Dangerous volcanic eruptions are a frequent occurrence in Indonesia. The absence of a properly resourced emergency infrastructure and aid resources for those affected reflects the indifference of the country's ruling elite to the plight of working people and the rural poor.



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