Human toll rises after Indonesian earthquake

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The death toll in the western Indonesian province of Aceh following a magnitude 6.5 earthquake that hit before dawn on December 7 stands at 101, with more than 800 injured. The number of people displaced or left homeless has risen in recent days to nearly 84,000.

Officials declared last Friday that search and rescue operations involving 1,500 personnel were nearing an end. Emergency response coordinators told Australia's ABC News that while the death toll could still increase, their focus was shifting to clearing and securing the damaged sites.

The destruction in the districts of Pidie Jaya, Pidie and Bireun is extensive: more than 11,500 houses, 152 mosques and Mushola (Muslim prayer rooms), 157 shops, 25 schools, a shopping centre and a hospital are listed as destroyed or severely damaged. Many roads have been badly cracked and power poles toppled over.

The disaster is the worst in the Aceh region since the magnitude 9.1 quake which struck on 26 December 2004 triggering a devastating tsunami that killed more than 120,000 Aceheans. A total of 226,000 people died along Indian Ocean shorelines across Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand and the Maldives.

Volunteers and rescue personnel have concentrated on the town of Meureudu, near the quake's epicentre. Local officials have pleaded for more medicines, doctors and supplies to treat the injured. "We need surgeons and orthopedics, because many victims have fractures," deputy district chief Said Mulyadi stated. Some areas have proved inaccessible to large machinery or too unstable, forcing rescuers to search by hand or with just basic tools.

More than a dozen bodies were pulled from rubble at a popular market place at Meureudu. A shop owner, Hajj Yusri Abdullah, told the *Independent* they included a group of eight—a newlywed couple and family members holding a celebration known as Antar Dara Baro. He did not hold out much hope of finding survivors.

Many of the severely injured were sent to other districts because Pidie Jaya's hospital was damaged and unsafe. Beds lined an outdoor corrugated iron-covered corridor where the quake victims lay injured and shocked. More than 300 were treated at the hospital for cuts and bruises, broken bones and head injuries—about 50 died there. Minor injuries were being treated in a field hospital erected in the grounds of the district chief's office.

A state of emergency has been declared in the province for two weeks, but the Indonesian government has not sought assistance from any foreign nation. The International Organisation of Migration's Paul Dillon told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the level of damage remains "opaque" and it was unclear how many people would be long-term or medium-term displaced.

Survivors told the ABC late last week they still feared a tsunami, although no warning was issued after the quake hit. Supplies of food and water were said to be low. The commander of a military medical facility, Major General Ben Rimba, said that with ongoing aftershocks, the biggest concern was illness and injuries.

The US Geological Survey said the earthquake was centred about 19 kilometres southeast of Sigli, a town near the northern tip of Sumatra, at a depth of 17 kilometres. Numerous aftershocks have rattled the area.

Devastating quakes occur regularly in the region. The world's largest archipelago, Indonesia is prone to earthquakes due to its location on the "Ring of Fire," an extensive arc of unstable fault lines in the Pacific Basin. Since 2004, thousands of people have died or been displaced in devastating earthquakes near the main island of Java in 2005, three times in 2006, and once again in 2009. An 8.5 magnitude quake hit Aceh in April 2012.

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Last Friday, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake rocked Solomon Islands, triggering tsunami warnings across the southwest Pacific. While no deaths were reported, humanitarian agencies said over 3,000 people were affected and many buildings damaged. It was followed by a second 6.9 magnitude earthquake on Saturday.

Last month, two earthquakes off Japan's northwest coast triggered tsunami fears and injured some 20 people. On November 14, a 7.8 magnitude quake hit New Zealand, isolating the seaside town of Kaikoura and causing considerable damage to the capital, Wellington.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo toured the stricken areas of Aceh on Friday, visiting a hospital and speaking to survivors at Atta Karuf mosque in Pidie Jaya. He reportedly told local children to "keep high spirits in your study, keep singing and stay happy."

Widodo announced 15 million rupiah ($US1,125) in compensation for families of the deceased, with those injured receiving 5 million rupiah. The government will allocate just 40 million rupiah for heavily-damaged houses and 20 million rupiah for partially-damaged homes. The amounts pledged are a pittance and will only support the most superficial and short-term measures.

The victims face the same levels of poverty and underdevelopment that created the conditions for this and previous disasters. Most of the dwellings that were flattened were poorly constructed and not designed to withstand tremors. The earthquake was significantly smaller than the massive quake that triggered the 2004 tsunami, yet it still caused substantial levels of destruction and suffering.

The repeated occurrence of such social tragedies is an indictment of the irrational character of the profit system, which subordinates social need to the profit requirements and anarchy of the capitalist market. Little is being done to prevent disasters in the future, either by the Indonesian government or by the major powers such as the United States.

According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the Asia-Pacific continues to be the world's most disaster-prone. In 2015 there were 160 reported major disasters, accounting for 47 percent of the world's total. Large-scale catastrophes caused more than 16,000 fatalities, more than a two-fold increase over 2014. In 2015, Asia and the Pacific incurred more than $45.1 billion in economic damage and even higher indirect losses.

The principal victims are the impoverished millions who constitute the urban working and rural poor, living in centres that ESCAP admits are "not adequately prepared" for such disasters. In 2014, memorials were held across Asia in remembrance of the thousands of victims of the 2004 catastrophe. Amid the commemorations, warnings were again raised by earthquake experts that the region's early-warning systems required vastly more development and funding.

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