

Almost 100 confirmed dead after Indonesian earthquake

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The official death toll from an earthquake that struck the Indonesian island of Lombok on Sunday night was raised to 98 this morning.

With at least several hundred others still missing, the number of fatalities could rise over the coming days. Some 269 people were injured, some with severe head wounds and broken bones.

Residents told the media they are terrified that the ordeal may not be over. Lombok has been struck by more than 100 aftershocks, and another 5.2 magnitude earthquake last night.

The main quake, with a magnitude of 6.9, struck on Sunday evening. The hardest-hit areas were in the north and interior regions of Lombok, which has a population of roughly 3.2 million. The island was previously hit by a quake on July 29, which killed at least 16 people and destroyed dozens of homes.

The latest disaster flattened an estimated 13,000 homes and structures. Residents and journalists described frightening scenes. In towns and villages across the island, locals rushed from falling structures.

Government authorities initially issued a tsunami alert, prompting widespread fear and leading thousands to leave their homes in search of higher ground.

The full extent of the damage remains unclear, especially in remote areas. Zul Ashfi, the humanitarian coordinator for the Islamic Relief charity, told the *Guardian* that scenes on the island were “catastrophic.”

“I saw people fleeing for their lives, screaming for help into their mobile phones as they ran,” Ashfi said. “It was very traumatic. They are now sleeping in the open air and have nothing. We are now working against the clock to reach as many people in need as we can.”

Imam, a resident of Mataram, the largest city on Lombok, told Agence Presse France: “Everyone immediately ran out of their homes, everyone is

panicking.” Large sections of the city, which has a population of almost half a million, were reportedly severely damaged or completely levelled.

Much of Mataram is without power, and numbers of patients have been evacuated from the main hospital. Elsewhere on the island, rescue crews have only begun to survey the damage. A number of areas have been cut off from all communications. There are warnings that the damage may have impacted upon water supplies, prompting fears of disease outbreaks.

In an indication of the possible scale of death and destruction, up to 40 people are believed to have died when a mosque collapsed in the village of Lading-Lading.

On the neighbouring island of Bali, numbers of buildings were damaged. Thousands of tourists, anxious to leave, have been stranded on both islands. Air travel and other means of transport have been affected.

Already, there are indications that the disaster’s impact has been compounded by inadequate planning and resources, despite the profits and revenues generated by tourism.

Between 20,000 and 80,000 Lombok residents have been displaced. The bulk of them appear to have been forced to fend for themselves. Others have moved to makeshift relief camps, with many living in tents.

Thomas Howells, a program coordinator for the Save the Children charity, told PBS: “People’s houses have been destroyed and they don’t want to leave their belongings. So they’re sitting outside their houses.”

The rescue effort is being hampered by limited relief equipment. Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, a representative of Indonesia’s official disaster agency, told the *Guardian* yesterday that relief and rescue operations were restricted by a shortage of heavy-lifting and earth-

moving equipment. As a result, Sutopo said, some rescuers had been forced to dig by hand.

In comments to CNN Indonesia, Sutopo pointed to lax building practices and codes as being a factor in the scale of the damage. He noted that the vast majority of the structures that had been destroyed in Lombok were residential.

“The problem is that Indonesians do not have houses that are earthquake resistant especially for people in rural villages with weak economic conditions,” Sutopo said. No government regulations required residential dwellings to be built to earthquake-resistant standards, he added, and many construction workers were not aware of building practices required to mitigate damage.

The lack of building safety is striking, given that Indonesia is one of the most earthquake-prone regions in the world, sitting atop the “Ring of Fire,” characterised by shifting tectonic plates.

The earthquake’s impact underscores the deepening social divide in Indonesia. Last year, Oxfam ranked it as the sixth most unequal country in the world. The four richest individuals have a combined wealth greater than the poorest 100 million people. Most surveys indicate that around a quarter of Lombok’s people live below the country’s meager poverty line.

On Monday, Indonesian President Joko Widodo announced he had ordered the coordination of all government departments for rescue and relief efforts.

Widodo’s government fears that the disaster could become a focal point of broader anger over social inequality and poverty, amid ongoing political instability. Widodo has ordered police and military officers to be deployed to the hardest-hit regions. They will inevitably clamp down on any opposition or anger from local residents.

Widodo declared that the victims would be compensated, but did not give any concrete figures. As in previous disasters, those worst-affected will likely be given a token sum that will do nothing to rebuild their homes, or their lives.

Indonesian government dignitaries and foreign representatives, including senior ministers from Australia, Singapore and elsewhere, were in Lombok for a regional conference on “counter-terrorism.” Along with the wealthiest layers in Lombok, they were shielded from the disaster in quake-proof hotel

buildings and shelters. The vast majority of ordinary people, however, were trapped in poorly-built and dangerous dwellings.



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