

Death toll rises to almost 400 after another Indonesian earthquake

John Harris
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Indonesia's Lombok Island was struck on August 9 by a third earthquake in the space of just several weeks. The disaster has exacerbated widespread death and destruction, with more than 13,000 injured and 387 killed this month.

The latest quake registered a magnitude of 5.9 on the Richter scale. It followed a 6.9 quake on August 5, the most powerful in the island's recorded history, and a 6.4 magnitude shock on July 29 that killed 16 people. More than 500 tremors and aftershocks have also been recorded.

A week after the August 5 disaster, thousands have yet to receive assistance. Disaster relief efforts have been hampered by poor infrastructure and rescue services on the island, failing telecommunication networks and damaged bridges and roads.

Aid agencies have warned of a developing humanitarian crisis on Lombok. Arifin Hadi, a spokesperson for the Red Cross, said that tens of thousands are without clean water, food, medicine and shelter. More than 387,000 people have been displaced, with many of them homeless, and over 68,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed.

National disaster agency spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho said that the death toll will grow because many victims are suspected to be buried under landslides and collapsed buildings.

The Indonesian Red Cross reported that in North Lombok—the most devastated area—around 334 people have died, some 20,000 people require aid, and approximately 80 percent of the buildings have been destroyed. An estimated three quarters of northern Lombok has been without power for over a week.

Residents have expressed anger over the inadequate government response. Many have said that food and water have been slow to arrive or not arrived at all.

They have told the media that while neighbours and community members have assisted one another, virtually no government assistance has been forthcoming.

On August 7, surviving residents who spoke to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation said people were still trapped underneath rubble of a collapsed mosque in West Pemenang, more than two days after the August 5 disaster, but that the government had not yet attempted to rescue them.

Hasbi Haer, a village elder in Sembalun Bumbung, told Fairfax Media on August 8 that government promises of assistance had yet to materialize. “President Widodo promised that the government will assist with 50 million rupiah [about \$4,600] for each house flattened, but we don't know when that will be,” he said. “We are now just thinking of surviving.” Hasbi added that it could be at least six months before his family were able to move out of the tents that they were staying in.

Grieving families have had to bury their dead relatives. Thousands still require medical attention, due to a shortage of medical personnel. Budhiawan, a village head, told the *New York Times* last week that many people were unable to be admitted to the local hospital because of a lack of space. He said that many were “forced to deal with broken bones and other injuries in the traditional way at home.”

The Tanjung Public Hospital in North Lambok was badly damaged by the quakes. Many patients had to be transferred to the island's capital, Mataram. Reports last Wednesday indicated that only six of the seven ambulance services were operating out of the facility due to fuel shortages.

Speaking to the *Strait Times* last week, Dr Mohammad Rizki, a local pathologist, said “my

colleagues have been doing back-to-back surgery since morning. Most cases have involved head injuries and broken bones. The whole West Nusa Tenggara province [which includes the Lombok and Sumbawa islands] has only two neurosurgeons and not many orthopaedic surgeons.”

The West Nusa Tenggara province has approximately 4.7 million people, according to the 2014 census, and is one of the poorest in the country.

The Indonesian political establishment is fearful of mounting anger over the inadequate official response. President Joko Widodo last week sought to ease tensions by pledging to rebuild damaged buildings.

Widodo also said he had instructed security minister Wiranto to send in the armed forces and national police. The mobilisation is aimed at suppressing the anger and frustration of the population.

Indonesia is one of the most earthquake prone regions in the world, sitting on the “Ring of Fire,” an area with substantial plate movements and volcanic activity. According to a 2015 Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance Report, “between 1970 and 2009, earthquakes accounted for more deaths and people affected than any other disaster type in Indonesia including tsunamis.”

The devastation has been exacerbated by lax building safety standards. In 2012, the Australian Indonesia Facility for Disaster Reduction (AIFDR) said that building codes in the country were a decade out of date and did “not incorporate lessons learned from recent damaging earthquakes or advances in earthquake hazard science.”

Authorities have estimated that the damage across Gilis islands and Lombok could easily exceed 1 trillion rupiah (\$A94.5 million).

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and the Australian Red Cross have promised a paltry \$150,000 in assistance, while USAID has provided \$US60,000. Such meagre sums will do next to nothing to address the crisis facing those affected by the disaster.



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