

More than eight hundred dead after earthquakes and tsunami strike Indonesia

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The Indonesian government warned on Saturday that thousands of people may have perished after earthquakes and a tsunami struck the island of Sulawesi last Friday. The official death toll rose sharply to 832 on Sunday and is expected to increase again once rescuers reach more remote areas.

While reports remain scanty, it is clear that what is unfolding is a tragedy on a massive scale, devastating the lives of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of impoverished workers, farmers and their families. Some 2.4 million people live on the Palu-Koro fault and the worst hit cities are Donggala and Palu. About 17,000 people have been evacuated.

The main 7.5-magnitude quake struck at 6.02pm local time, followed by tsunami waves which were estimated at 6 metres high in some places. An earlier magnitude 6.1 quake in central Sulawesi killed several people, injured 10 and damaged dozens of houses.

The powerful tremor was felt in the far south of the island in its largest city Makassar and on neighbouring Kalimantan, Indonesia's portion of Borneo. More than 150 aftershocks have hit the region, situated 1,300km northwest of Jakarta.

It is the most devastating earthquake to hit Indonesia in over a decade, and comes just seven weeks after the islands of Lombok and Bali were devastated by a series of quakes that killed at least 623 people and destroyed hundreds of thousands of buildings.

Palu has been left shattered. There is no electricity, and drinking water is in short supply. Video footage showed waves bringing down several buildings and inundating a large mosque which was half submerged in the rising waters. The town is strewn with debris from collapsed buildings and a large shopping mall is all but destroyed.

Some 821 of the recorded deaths occurred in Palu. Partially covered bodies have been shown lying near the shore, with survivors left to search through a tangle of

corrugated steel roofing, timber and rubble. One man was seen carrying the muddy corpse of a small child. With the threat of disease increasing, mass graves are being prepared to bury the many dead.

Among the deceased was a 21 year-old air traffic controller, Anthonius Gunawan Agung, who heroically stayed in the swaying control tower at Palu airport to ensure that a plane carrying hundreds of passengers took off safely. He jumped from the tower and died before a medical helicopter could reach him.

The government has stated there is "no word" about casualties in Donggala, a city of some 300,000 people which remains completely cut-off after its main bridge collapsed. Jan Gelfand, a Jakarta-based Red Cross official said; "We have heard nothing from Donggala and this is extremely worrying... This is already a tragedy, but it could get much worse."

A spokesman for the National Disaster Mitigation Agency, Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, said at least 540 people had been badly injured, and many are still missing. There are ongoing concerns over the fate of hundreds of people who were preparing for a beach festival that had been due to start when the tsunami hit.

Palu is built around a narrow bay that apparently magnified the force of the tsunami. Sutopo shared video showing the liquefaction of the land when the tsunami struck and said as it approached it had reached 800 kms/hr. Most people were killed by the tsunami. The *Guardian* cited one local resident, Nining, who said; "Many corpses are scattered on the beach and floating on the surface of the sea."

Hospitals have struggled to cope with the influx of casualties, setting up open-air clinics to treat the injured. Rescuers working to retrieve up to 50 people from the rubble of a hotel in Palu said they could hear the voices of people inside but did not have the heavy equipment needed to get to them.

Indonesian officials and aid agencies have struggled with battered communications, destroyed roads and landslides. Aid deliveries by sea have been disrupted since Palu's port was badly damaged. Only a limited number of government planes carrying relief supplies have managed to land at the airport in Palu.

The shambolic character of the official response makes clear that fourteen years after the 2004 tsunami—which killed as many as 230,000 people throughout the Indian Ocean region, the majority of them in Indonesia—nothing has been done to prevent further calamities.

Governments throughout the region have instead intensified cutbacks to social spending, in line with the demands of international finance and the local ruling elites that they represent.

The Associated Press reported today that an early warning system, designed in the wake of the 2004 tsunami, has “been stalled in the testing phase” for over a decade. After severe funding reductions by successive governments, Indonesia’s disaster agencies have been unable to cobble together a paltry 1 billion rupiah (\$A95,500) required to complete the project.

Louise Comfort, a University of Pittsburgh academic who was involved in the project commented today: “To me this is a tragedy for science, even more so a tragedy for the Indonesian people as the residents of Sulawesi are discovering right now. It’s a heartbreak to watch when there is a well-designed sensor network that could provide critical information.”

Some 22 buoys, which are a key component of the existing warning mechanism are no longer functioning. It is reportedly difficult, using the antiquated system, to provide any advanced warning of an impending tsunami, that would aid those in affected areas to escape.

Criticisms have been levelled against the country's geophysics agency for lifting the tsunami warning just 34 minutes after it was first issued, which may have caused confusion and exacerbated the death toll.

Spokesman Rahmat Triyono claimed the agency followed standard operating procedure and made the call to “end” the warning based on data available from the closest tidal sensor, 200km from Palu. He said the tide gauge, which measures changes in the sea level, had only recorded an “insignificant” 6cm wave. “If we had a tide gauge or proper data in Palu it would have been better. This is something we must evaluate for the future,” Triyono said.

Indonesia, a 5,000-kilometre long archipelago comprising 17,000 islands, is one of the most quake-prone

regions in the world, in a zone known as the Ring of Fire. Little has been done, however, to ensure that new dwellings are built to resist the frequent natural disasters.

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

There has been negligible aid or material assistance from any of the major powers or regional governments. Condolences, but no concrete promises, have been issued by the Australian and Singapore governments. Turkey’s Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH) has sent a tiny five-person emergency aid team. Experience from previous disasters indicates that any international aid will be tardy, woefully inadequate, and dictated by geo-strategic considerations rather than concern for the thousands of victims.

Troops are being rushed to the area. Indonesian president, Joko Widodo, said the military was being called in to the region to help search-and-rescue teams get to victims and find bodies. However, their priority will be to prevent the outbreak of any anti-government sentiment as conditions inevitably deteriorate.

Troop deployments are a regular occurrence following such disasters. The government fears that they could become a focal point of broader anger over social inequality and poverty, amid ongoing political instability. Last year, Oxfam ranked Indonesia as the sixth most unequal country in the world. The four richest individuals have a combined wealth greater than the poorest 100 million people. Workers and the rural poor inevitably suffer the hardest in any such natural calamities.

The repeated occurrence of such catastrophes is not merely a natural phenomenon. Above all, it is an expression of the irrational character of the profit system, which subordinates social need to the profit requirements of a tiny corporate and financial elite, at the expense of the vast majority of the population.



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