

Anger grows as Indonesian tsunami disaster worsens

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Reports that entire villages have been buried in mud, possibly killing thousands of people, point to the true scale of the devastation triggered by last Friday's earthquake and tsunami on Indonesia's Sulawesi island. They also highlight the indifference and inadequacy of the response of the Indonesian government and the global capitalist powers.

The disaster's total official death toll has risen above 1,400, but it is obvious that the real figure is much higher. Most of the confirmed dead have come from the region's main city, Palu. Losses in remote areas remain unknown. Communications have been cut and bridges and roads have been destroyed or blocked by landslides.

Even by official estimates, about 1.6 million people have been affected, on top of those killed and injured. Hundreds of thousands of people have gone without food or water for days. Because of the lack of government and international assistance, desperate residents have been reduced to scavenging for food in wrecked houses, shops, farms and orchards.

Six days after the 7.5 magnitude earthquake first struck, it has been revealed that at least two villages near Palu have virtually disappeared into liquefied sinkholes, even though they were not directly affected by the tsunami that swept through Palu, population 380,000 and Donggala, a coastal town of 300,000.

Many of the 1,747 houses in Balaroa, a few kilometres outside Palu, have sunk into the ground, with little more remaining than rooftops sticking out of the mud. Residents fear that up to 70 percent of its 2,000 people have been killed. According to media reports, the village is destined to become an unmarked grave, with earthmovers to be used to bury the entire location.

In the smaller nearby village of Petobo, many of the

744 houses are buried in mud sludge, resembling quicksand. "The houses just got sucked into the earth and then the mud came over and sealed them over," a survivor, Joshua Michael, 24, told the *Guardian*. "I saw my neighbours get buried alive." Densely populated, Petobo was home to 11,000 people.

Even according to the limited coverage provided by the world's corporate media, anger is rising over the lack of official help amid worsening conditions. Reporters described scenes of hospitals being overwhelmed, people queueing for petrol for 24 hours and devastated rural areas remaining without any help.

A *Guardian* report noted: "On Tuesday evening half a dozen police officers with automatic rifles were guarding long queues of frustrated residents and their gerry cans at a Palu petrol station. Hengki, a local resident, said he had been waiting for almost eight hours in the searing heat. 'I survived a disaster and now I have to survive this?' he asked, visibly agitated.

"Others in the queue chimed in with shared anger and disgust. 'The government doesn't care about us,' said another resident, Yuli, repeating a refrain seen spray-painted on at least one Palu city wall."

In one devastated Palu warehouse, survivors clamoured over a reeking pile of rubbish or staked out a patch of territory before pulling out small cartons of milk, soft drinks, rice, sweets and painkillers. "We came here because we heard there was food," Rehanna, a 23-year-old student from Balaroa village, told the Associated Press (AP). "We need clean water, rice."

In an apparent effort to assuage the outrage, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo visited Palu for a second time yesterday, surveying the collapsed Roa Roa hotel where search and rescue workers were trying to get to 30 people still buried.

However, the focus on the hotel angered residents

who asked why poorer areas were being neglected, and why food, water, fuel and medicine had yet to reach areas outside Palu.

“We feel like we are stepchildren here because all the help is going to Palu,” commented Mohamad Taufik, 38, from Donggala, where five of his relatives are still missing. “There are many young children here who are hungry and sick, but there is no milk or medicine,” he told AP.

Aid being distributed in Palu features red and white bags—the colours of the Indonesian flag—marked as being supplied by the president’s office. But the government’s real focus is not aid but suppressing unrest.

Indonesian military chief Hadi Tjahyanto said an armed soldier and an armed police officer would be placed on every aid truck, and soldiers would be sent to secure markets, the airport and fuel depots to maintain order where there had been reports of “looting.” Police said they had begun making arrests of those allegedly caught stealing.

Indonesia is the world’s fourth most populous nation, with about 260 million people. The World Bank rates it a poverty-reduction success story because the pro-market regime established since the downfall of the US-backed Suharto military dictatorship in 1998 has supposedly halved the poverty rate to around 10 percent.

In reality, by Oxfam’s calculations, Indonesia has become, like the rest of the planet, extremely unequal. Its four richest men now hold more wealth than 100 million of the country’s poorest people, whose incomes hover marginally above the official national poverty line. As of last year, 93 million Indonesians lived on less than \$US3.10 a day, which is defined by the World Bank as the moderate poverty line.

The economic and political gulf between the ruling elite and the impoverished is epitomised by the government’s insistence that it lacked the funds to maintain the tsunami warning systems put in place after the 2004 tsunami that killed more than 167,000 people, most of them in Indonesia.

National Disaster Management Board (NDMB) spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho told AP that Indonesia had 4,500 to 6,000 earthquakes a year but, due to a limited budget, had just 60 tsunami siren units. “We need thousands of them,” he said. Twenty-five to

35 buoys designed to warn about a tsunami approaching Palu had been out of order since 2012, he said.

A more sophisticated early warning system that might have prevented many of the deaths in the tsunami has been stalled in the testing phase for years. A high-tech system of sea-floor sensors, data-laden sound waves and fibre-optic cable was meant to replace a system set up after the 2004 tsunami but had not moved beyond a prototype.

The shocking lack of assistance from the global powers also seems bound up with political calculations by the Indonesian government. It is evidently anxious to wrap itself in nationalist imagery while balancing between the conflicting interests of the rival powers, notably the US and China, that are vying for influence over the strategic archipelago and the Indo-Pacific region as a whole.

After three days of delay, the government agreed to accept international aid on Sunday night, but then later reportedly told foreign rescue teams to “stand down,” insisting it had the disaster under control. Palu’s airport remained closed to foreign airlines wishing to transport aid into the area and Vice President Jusuf Kalla said the government had rejected the offer of a hospital ship from the US government.

The BNPB’s Sutopo said the international assistance would be “selective.” He told a news conference: “We need to select the countries based on their capacity to help us.”

Every aspect of the official response is an indictment of the private profit system, in which a super-rich elite monopolises society’s wealth, and the divisive nation-state system itself, through which the capitalist classes maintain their rule.

Adding to the crisis, a volcano erupted yesterday in North Sulawesi province, about 940 kilometres northeast of the earthquake zone, spitting ash more than 6,000 metres into the sky. Planes were warned of the cloud billowing from Mount Soputan but no evacuations were ordered in the area.



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