Indonesia’s earthquake catastrophe

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6 October 2018

Eight days after a 7.5-magnitude earthquake and tsunami devastated central Sulawesi, Indonesia, the death toll continues to climb. The official figure has now surpassed 1,570 and there are more than 2,500 injured. Thousands more bodies, however, are thought to be buried in mud, under collapsed buildings, or swept out to sea.

An area with over 1.5 million inhabitants, including the cities of Palu and Donggala, has been devastated. In Palu, population 380,000, thousands of poorly-constructed houses were swallowed up by liquefaction (when an earthquake causes the ground to liquefy). Others were swept away in the tsunami. Some villages have been wiped off the map.

At least 70,000 people are homeless or displaced, many sleeping in tents or in the open. Hospitals are overflowing and medical supplies are scarce. Power has not returned to most areas. Food and drinking water are in desperately short supply. Thousands of people have been reduced to scavenging in farmland and searching abandoned shops and warehouses for food.

Ordinary people responded to the disaster with bravery and selflessness. Many spent days digging through rubble by hand in search of survivors, who were crying out for help. By yesterday, all the voices had gone silent. The lengthy delay in sending rescue teams and excavating machinery led to countless avoidable deaths among those who were trapped. Some areas have still not been reached by rescuers.

There is widespread outrage over the uncoordinated and grossly inadequate official relief operation. President Joko Widodo initially tried to downplay the catastrophe, refusing to declare a national disaster. His administration did not call for international aid for three days. Military and police were quickly sent to guard private property and suppress any unrest, with orders to “shoot on sight” desperate people caught “robbing” shops for food and water.

The amounts donated by foreign governments so far are a pittance, showing their disinterest and lack of concern for those affected. The US government offered to send a Navy hospital ship, turning the disaster into a military exercise, but Jakarta rejected the proposal.

The horrific suffering and loss of life in Sulawesi is not the result of random, natural forces. It is a crime produced by the capitalist system. All the resources needed to prepare for such disasters are monopolised by the super-rich.

Adam Switzer, a scientist at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, told the *Guardian* the disaster was “not unexpected.” A paper published in 2013 “suggested that the Palu fault, which is very straight and very long, had the potential for causing a very destructive earthquake and tsunami.” Yet nothing was done to prepare.

Indonesia is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, located in what is known as the Pacific Ring of Fire due to its highly volatile tectonic fault lines. Earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding and volcanic eruptions regularly kill hundreds or thousands. The Lombok earthquake on August 5 killed over 400 people, largely because of cheap and unsafe housing, without adequate foundations or reinforcements.

The catastrophic Indian Ocean tsunami on December 26, 2004, killed more than 230,000 people in 14 countries, including 167,000 in Indonesia, and displaced 1.7 million people. Fourteen years later, there is nothing to prevent a tragedy on the same scale from happening again.

The Indonesian government refuses to pay for even the most basic precautions, such as educating the population about tsunamis. Reports indicate that the first waves hit Sulawesi about 25 minutes after the earthquake, yet many people did not understand that the quake was a warning to move quickly inland. A text message sent by Indonesia’s disaster agency five

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minutes after the tremor did not reach many people because of damaged phone towers. There were no coastal sirens or other warning mechanisms.

After 2004, governments in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India and many other countries promised to establish a tsunami warning system for the Indian Ocean. Indonesia's 22 tsunami detection buoys installed as part of that system have not worked since 2012 due to budget cuts and a lack of maintenance. An advanced network of undersea sensors and cables, which could provide early tsunami warnings, has been stalled in its prototype phase because of what one report described as "inter-agency wrangling" over a mere 1 billion rupiah ($69,000) needed to finish the job.

There is no shortage of money in the hands of the rich in Indonesia and globally that could be used to vastly improve the warning system. Like the rest of the world, Indonesia has become increasingly socially unequal. Last year, 32 dollar billionaires had a combined wealth of $113 billion, while 93 million people, more than a third of the population, lived on less than $3.10 a day.

Successive governments have stripped away funding for basic infrastructure, including emergency systems, while slashing corporate taxes and regulations that are seen as constraints on profits. Mining companies, palm oil plantations and other businesses are given free rein to pollute the environment and destroy forests, raising the risk of landslides and floods. Building standards are also routinely flouted with impunity.

Vast sums of money are squandered on the military. Indonesia's defence budget soared from $2.5 billion in 2005 to $8 billion in 2018. Like other countries throughout the Indo-Pacific region, Indonesia has become embroiled in the US-led military build-up and threats against China, which Washington views as a potential challenge to its global hegemony.

In the heavily-militarised South China Sea, advanced warships and planes from several countries stand ready to launch devastating attacks at a moment's notice. But just 600 miles to the southeast, in Sulawesi, thousands of traumatised quake victims are forced to spend days and weeks without assistance, told by President Widodo to "be patient."

During the 2004 disaster, the government of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono left hundreds of thousands of tsunami victims to fend for themselves. Displaced people spent years living in squalid camps, while reconstruction dragged on for nearly a decade. Survivors of the Sulawesi quake, many of whom have lost everything, can expect the same callous treatment.

Indonesia is far from unique. Throughout the world, from earthquakes in China and Nepal, to hurricanes in the United States and Haiti, profit-driven considerations make natural calamities immeasurably worse. The results include climate change and environmental degradation, the lack of emergency services, poverty and social inequality, and the failure of governments to cooperate internationally in the interests of protecting vulnerable people.

Wije Dias, general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, noted in a statement on the first anniversary of the 2004 tsunami: "The humanitarian instincts of ordinary people stood in marked contrast to the reaction of the political establishment. They provide a small glimpse of what would be possible if the vast resources created by the international working class were utilised to meet the social needs of the world's population."

The failure of the international aid operation, he explained, posed the need for a conscious political movement that sets out to replace the outmoded capitalist nation-state system, with one based on international socialism. The building of such a movement, fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International, is today more urgent than ever.

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