

Death toll rises from Indonesian tsunami

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The death toll from the Sunda Strait tsunami disaster continues to rise. The Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management (BNPB) announced yesterday that at least 429 people have been killed, over 1,480 injured and more than 150 remain missing. Thousands of homes and over 70 hotels and 60 shops were heavily damaged or destroyed.

Scientists have confirmed that the tsunami was caused by a 64-hectare landslide on the nearby island volcano of Anak Krakatoa. It produced the massive and fast-moving waves that hit towns and popular beach resorts on both sides of the Sunda Strait at about 9.30 p.m. on December 22.

The volcano lies in the middle of the western side of the narrow strait. Survivors received no warning of the tsunami with waves estimated to have been between 2 and 5 metres high.

The Pandeglang district, on the Javan side of the strait and not far from Jakarta, suffered the largest numbers of casualties. Some 290 people were killed and over 14,390 rendered homeless—that is, the overwhelming majority of 20,000 people displaced by the catastrophe.

Heavy monsoonal rains and flooding are now complicating emergency rescue and relief with teams from the Indonesian military, the Indonesian Red Cross and NGOs unable to reach remote areas.

Damaged bridges and flooded rivers have made roads impassable, holding up convoys delivering heavy machinery and emergency relief supplies—food, medicine, shelters, latrines and generators—and forcing disaster officials to use helicopters to drop supplies and evacuate residents. Emergency relief doctors have told the media that supplies of medicine and clean water are dwindling and that children are becoming dehydrated and falling ill. Thousands of survivors are living in unhealthy conditions in areas hit by the tsunami.

National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho said that the search for victims

and possible survivors was being expanded but that “the casualties may keep increasing” because many victims might still be buried under the debris.

The lack of heavy equipment in these remote areas means that distraught local residents have had to pick through the rubble of collapsed homes and other dwellings to try and find the bodies.

The Indonesian government has rejected offers of international aid, declaring that it can deal with the latest disaster. Emergency operations will only continue in Pandeglang district until January 4, and December 29 for Lampung Selatan District on the Sumatran side of the Sunda Strait.

Disaster response officials have warned that ongoing volcanic activity at Anak Krakatoa and high tides could produce more tsunamis.

On Tuesday, Dwikorita Karnawati, head of Indonesia’s Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG), told the media that “the walls of the volcano’s caldera have been getting fragile [and could result in more landslides], especially if heavy rains pour onto it.” She called on local residents to “stay away from coastal areas, [and] at least between 500 metres and 1kilometre from the shoreline.”

Saturday’s tsunami is the third major disaster to hit Indonesia in the past six months. Powerful earthquakes took place on the island of Lombok in July and August. A tsunami in September killed around 2,200 people and displaced about 70,000 others in Palu on Sulawesi Island.

Yesterday marked the 14th anniversary of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that killed 226,000 people in 13 countries, including more than 120,000 in Indonesia, triggered by an earthquake off northern Sumatra.

In the aftermath of the 2004 catastrophe, a UN conference in Japan agreed to establish the Indian Ocean Tsunami Warning System—a network of deep sea sensors, as well as seismic stations and tidal gauges,

linked to onshore alarm systems to alert those in danger. Assistance was to be provided by a number of countries, including the US, Europe and Japan.

Indonesia's current warning system is made up of seabed sensors that are to detect changes in pressure and indicate an incoming tsunami. Surface buoys receive this data and transmit it to satellites. An earthquake near Sumatra in 2016, however, revealed that 22 of these buoys were not working and had not been since 2012.

The fact that the tsunami was caused by a massive landslide, rather than an earthquake, meant no seismic data was produced. A deep-sea buoy in the Sunda Strait could have triggered an alert but it not clear at this stage whether such a buoy was ever deployed in the area. Given the narrowness of the Sunda Strait, a highly efficient warning system was needed in order to give people in danger even a small amount of time to flee.

After Saturday's tragedy, Indonesian President Joko Widodo directed the country's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) to develop systems "that can provide early warnings to the community."

Yesterday the Indonesian government announced it will begin work on a new warning system capable of detecting undersea landslides, the BBC has reported. Iyan Tu from the government's Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology, told the BBC that the new system would address the holes in the current system and be capable of detecting landslides.

In line with previous promises, this is likely to be little more than hot air. As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in a perspective published in the aftermath of the Lombok tsunami-earthquake:

"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. ...

"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."



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