

Cyclone Seroja wreaks death and destruction in Indonesia, East Timor and Western Australia

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Severe Tropical Cyclone Seroja triggered deadly flash flooding and landslides in parts of southeast Indonesia and in East Timor, including its capital Dili.

The worst of the damage occurred April 4–6. On April 12, after having moved south, the cyclone hit the coast of Western Australia. One person in Coral Bay died in the cyclone, a maintenance worker who was electrocuted, while about 70 percent of all homes and structures were damaged in the town of Kalbarri, with 40 percent entirely destroyed.

While tropical storms are commonplace in the region, Cyclone Seroja was the most powerful cyclone to hit in decades. An estimated 180 people were killed in Indonesia, 42 in East Timor, while more than 20,000 homes were submerged across both countries, rendering tens of thousands of people homeless.

The disaster still threatens to trigger a wave of dangerous diseases in multiple impoverished communities, including cholera, dysentery, typhoid—and COVID-19. Both Indonesia and East Timor have experienced recent increases in coronavirus infection rates.

While the cyclone was an unpreventable weather event, its devastating impact is a product of the capitalist system. Indonesia is a country with considerable natural wealth, yet the majority of its 270 million people live in poverty. The country's top four billionaires control as much wealth as the bottom 40 percent of the population. The national government serves the interests of the ultra-wealthy and the transnational corporations, and has failed to invest public funds in basic infrastructure. This includes cyclone alert systems and emergency response systems.

According to a Reuters report, cyclone alerts rely on

the Indonesia's weather agency feeding warnings to local disaster agencies. In the case of Cyclone Seroja, this system proved grossly inadequate.

On the islands of Alor, Lembata, and Adonara, some local residents received no warning at all ahead of the destructive cyclone. Others heard mosques and churches issuing alerts, but only shortly before the destructive weather pattern hit. The cyclone coincided with Easter Sunday, with some of the affected islands having majority Christian populations.

Numerous tragic stories have emerged. AFP reported from Lembata island, where some villages were swept down mountainsides. Resident Basir Langoday reported hearing screams from a home that had been buried in rubble. "There were four of them inside," he explained. "Three survived but the other one didn't make it." Langoday and others were unable to prevent one of the trapped men from being crushed to death.

Emergency response workers continue to deal with mass homelessness and the threat posed to survivors by hunger and exposure.

Coronavirus fears are exacerbating the challenges. Indonesia has had a total of more than 1.5 million infections. Daily infections are more than 5,000, though this is down from a peak of 12,000 in late January.

The situation is even more concerning in East Timor, because of a recent wave of COVID-19 infections. After spending most of 2020 coronavirus-free, since the beginning of March there has been a steady rise in daily infections, with the seven-day average now over 40. Nearly half of the country's total infections during the pandemic (1,074) have been registered in the last two weeks.

With only very limited testing taking place, the real

rate of infection is likely substantially higher. Initial vaccinations have only just begun, with the first delivery arriving in the country on April 5.

Timor's worst hit area by Cyclone Seroja was its capital, Dili. Flash floods swept debris through populated areas, displacing a reported 13,000 people. Many of these have since taken shelter in makeshift emergency refuge centres. There is no proper social distancing or use of personal protective equipment in these centres.

Madalena da Costa Hanjan Soares, head of Timor's Red Cross, said, "It's heartbreaking to see people making a choice between having a safe shelter, adequate food and water, or trying to avoid the spread of this deadly COVID-19 virus. This is a race against time. The longer people have to stay in these temporary shelters, the higher the risk of a mass outbreak."

Casualties of the cyclone included 42 deceased Dili residents. One survivor, Markus dos Santos, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that his wife and three children had been buried by an avalanche of mud and water that hit their house. He managed to pull two of his daughters to safety as they were being sucked under the mud. His wife and two-year-old son, however, did not survive.

The cyclone damage comes just over a year after monsoonal rains in Dili triggered damaging flooding in many parts of the city. No proper flooding protections were put in place by the government after this experience, facilitating the damage now caused by Cyclone Seroja.

One Dili resident, whose family home was then submerged by flood waters, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Before the major flooding hit, there had already been three days of constant rain every night. As a result, we started worrying about the possibility of another major flood, but there was not any signs from the government to alert anyone, especially those of us who live in high risk areas. We were left on our own to fence ourselves off from the pending disaster.

"Fresh from last year's and this year's flooding, Dili is no longer a safe place to live. Another disaster will strike again, and whichever political party is in government, I don't think they will redesign the capital for the safety of its own people."

Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak has estimated that the cost of recovery from the cyclone will total more

than \$US100 million. Yet the government has so far allocated less than \$US1.5 million for the recovery mission, including for food supplies and transport.

The Australian government has announced a relief package of just \$7 million. This pittance again underscores the fraud of Canberra's "humanitarian" concerns for the Timorese people, after it used this pretext in 1999 to launch a military intervention into the territory in order to protect its economic and geostrategic interests.



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