

Indonesia suffers devastating earthquake

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Search and rescue operations are ongoing following a 5.6 magnitude earthquake on the Indonesian island of Java on Monday at 1:21 p.m. It is the deadliest earthquake since 2018 in the disaster-prone country. The death toll is more than 270 with 40 still missing and over 2,000 people injured.

The epicenter was in Cianjur District 75km south-east of the highly populated capital, Jakarta. While the latter felt tremors prompting evacuation from high rise buildings, it suffered little damage. Despite being relatively moderate, the earthquake struck close to the earth's surface (at a depth of 10km as opposed to typically hundreds) and directly under rural areas prone to landslides where buildings are poorly constructed.

Almost the entire village of Cijedil was swallowed up by one such landslide with dozens of people engulfed. Residents took to clearing the earth with picks and shovels, but the houses were buried too deeply and excavators were in short supply.

Road blockages and driving rain are complicating rescue operations with many villages yet to receive logistical support. The National Search and Rescue Agency have deployed several helicopters to provide supplies to remote areas and 6,000 rescuers have been dispatched.

Millions of people have been affected by the tremors with 56,000 houses damaged. At least 61,000 people have been displaced, many sleeping in makeshift tents. Officials said that 171 public facilities were destroyed including 31 schools.

Power has been lost in many areas, cell phone services are down, and hospitals overwhelmed. Herman Suherman, a government official from Cianjur town, said typically injuries were bone fractures sustained by those trapped by building debris. Due to the danger of aftershocks, many patients were being treated outside under tents. At night staff have relied on torchlights.

Due to the tremor striking at midday, many children

were trapped and crushed inside school buildings. In a media release, the charity Save the Children reports that about 100 children have been confirmed dead, with 80 schools damaged.

A teacher, Ayu, told the organization: "I was standing at the front of the class and then I heard a lot of people screaming. Everyone said run, leave the room. I thought all of the children had left the classroom but it turned out there was still one child who was left behind, he was sick, so I picked him and ran.

"Only a few seconds later, our school walls collapsed in front of us. We were so shocked everyone screamed and cried. As teachers we tried to calm the children down but they were really shocked. They need psychological support as soon as possible, they were really scared. The worst is some of them may also have to face the loss of their parents."

Widjojo Prakoso, a professor of engineering at the University of Indonesia, pointed to the failure of many schools to survive the impact. "School buildings should get special attention because they are not only supposed to withstand earthquakes, but they should also act as a temporary shelter during disasters," he said.

There have been over 170 aftershocks recorded since Monday, one of them triggering a landslide according to police. There are also fears that typical waterways have been blocked creating the danger for flash flooding in the region as Indonesia enters its monsoonal season.

The impact of the earthquake has been most severe on the poor. The subordination of all aspects of society to the demands of corporate profit hamstrings rational and scientific approaches to mitigating and dealing with natural disasters. According to an Oxfam report earlier this year, just four men in Indonesia hold more wealth than the most impoverished 100 million.

Population growth coupled with the high costs of living has forced to people living outside the most

developed urban areas and into more precarious areas, where companies, agencies and property developers often overlook building codes and standards. Yet Indonesia is situated near the “Ring of Fire,” the most seismically active region in the world.

President Joko Widodo visited affected areas in Cianjur on Tuesday and subsequently authorized 12,000 soldiers and 2,000 police to help in the ongoing searches for dead and missing.

Widodo also issued toothless calls for earthquake-proof housing to be included in reconstruction efforts, a systematic problem that has persisted for decades in the country. He has promised to rebuild infrastructure and provide a pittance of up to 50 million rupiah (\$US3,180) to each resident whose house was damaged.

Widodo’s policies may well have contributed to the disaster by undermining of previous environment and safety regulations. Certainly his government has funnelled money into tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy as well as into the military while essential services including emergency services are starved of funds.

The devastating 7.5 magnitude earthquake and tsunami in 2018 in central Sulawesi is estimated to have killed more than 4,000 people and injured many more. In the city of Palu, thousands of poorly constructed houses were destroyed in the disaster.

The earthquake raised all the issues that needed to be addressed: earthquake resistant building standards, properly funded emergency services and assistance to those affected. Yet little or nothing was done in the wake of that tragedy.



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