

Massive flooding in Asia leaves over 1,500 dead, hundreds missing

Ben McGrath
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Devastating floods and landslides have struck Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Malaysia in recent days as intense rains have continued to strike throughout the Southeast Asia region. Hundreds have been killed while hundreds more remain missing. While weather cannot be controlled, much of the impact from this latest horrific disaster is man-made through the degradation of the environment and the sabotaging of disaster planning.

As of Thursday, 836 people have been confirmed dead in Sumatra, Indonesia and hundreds still remain missing. These figures are sure to change. The three hardest hit provinces are Aceh, North Sumatra and West Sumatra. More than 2,600 people have been injured while 3.2 million people have been impacted. Thousands of homes have been badly damaged as well as hundreds of other buildings and pieces of infrastructure, including schools and bridges.

The destruction on Sumatra is the worst since the 2004 tsunami. Heavy rains began on November 25 as a result of Cyclone Senyar and Typhoon Koto, which struck at the beginning of the country's monsoon season. Flooding has continued to leave many areas inundated under water this week as survivors struggle to receive aid. Total destruction is estimated to have caused 68.67 trillion rupiah (\$US4.14 billion) worth of damage.

The disaster in Indonesia follows terrible flooding in Vietnam and Thailand. The latest flooding in Thailand has left 185 dead. The *Bangkok Post*, however, reported on December 1 that rescue volunteers believe the true number of dead could be closer to 500 or even 1,000. The hardest hit area has been around the city of Hat Yai in Songkhla province in the south.

In Malaysia, nine states on the Malaysian Peninsula have been inundated, displacing tens of thousands into

evacuation centres and flooding homes, farms and small businesses. Three people have been confirmed dead.

Sri Lanka has also experienced a terrible death toll from flooding caused by Cyclone Ditwah, with 479 people killed and hundreds more still missing. Heavy rains and landslides have devastated 25 districts. Hundreds are still missing and about a million people have been affected.

Many of the survivors from different countries have expressed similar experiences, describing the rains and flooding as some of the worst they have ever seen in a region where these intense weather patterns are common.

A 56-year-old evacuee from Sumatra told the media, "This is the worst damage I've ever experienced. My house was flooded after an embankment collapsed. I need materials to rebuild and basic daily necessities."

As survivors in Indonesia now struggle with the aftermath of the flooding, they face the prospect of hunger and a lack of fresh water as supplies dwindle. A health crisis is growing as they are forced to drink flood water. Teuku Raja Keumangan, a local official in Aceh, told the media, "People are getting sick." Many of these local officials have called on President Prabowo Subianto to institute a national emergency, which by law would help procure additional funds and resources for the impacted regions.

Local governments are also struggling to disperse aid and, in many cases, have run out of disaster management funds. This did not stop presidential spokesman Prasetyo Hadi from claiming on December 3 that the current amount of disaster relief was sufficient, with the central government rejecting calls for increased financial aid.

Many in Indonesia have sharply criticized the

government's slow response. Reinaro Waruwu, a 52-year-old evacuee, stated, "Some waited a day and night before receiving help, so they couldn't be saved. I am frustrated, it doesn't need to be said twice. The response was not quick."

To say that the Prabowo administration simply ignored disaster planning would be an understatement. At the beginning of this year, Prabowo drastically slashed government spending to the tune of \$US44 billion. Much of this was diverted to the then-newly launched Danantara sovereign wealth fund, controlled by Prabowo himself. Funding for Indonesia's disaster management agency alone was cut by 50 percent from last year. These cuts led to widespread protests in February and contributed to the explosion of social anger that took place in demonstrations at the end of August.

This is part of a broader attack on the working class that the Prabowo government is conducting. Not only does it include the imposition of austerity measures, but the largest expansion of the military this century. This year 150 "territorial development battalions" have been created this year with plans to expand this annually by the same figure until there is one battalion in each of Indonesia's 514 regencies and cities.

The Prabowo government is far more concerned about opposition in the working class than the terrible effects of natural disasters. These battalions will be deployed to monitor and suppress working class struggles using funds that could have been spent on flood management and other safety measures.

Furthermore, environment degradation in the form of deforestation has contributed to the intensity of the recent floods. Forests are an important part of regulating water flow, helping to prevent erosion and channeling water underground. As trees are cut down, it increases the risk of flooding and landslides. Gus Irawan Pasaribu, a local official from Tapanuli, North Sumatra told Reuters, "Yes, there were cyclonic factors, but if our forests were well-preserved... it would not have been this terrible."

Many forests have been cleared in Indonesia to make way for palm plantations for producing palm oil, one of the country's main exports. According to Global Forest Watch, North Sumatra alone lost 28 percent of its tree-covered area, or 1.6 million hectares, between 2001 and 2024.

However, the most significant factor driving these extreme weather events is climate change. The United Nations World Meteorological Organization has stated that last year was the hottest on record, with average global surface temperatures rising to 1.55 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial levels. Seas in the region have also increased in temperature by almost one degree Celsius over the same period.

For each degree Celsius that the atmospheric temperature rises, the amount of water vapor in the area increases by seven percent, according to NASA. This leads to more intense storms and heavier rains. Yet capitalist governments around the world have taken no serious steps to address climate change or other forms of environmental degradation that contribute to the disasters now unfolding on a regular basis.



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