

# Deadly landslide in West Java exposes consequences of government neglect

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A deadly landslide tore through Pasirlangu village in West Bandung, West Java, on January 24 in the pre-dawn hours. At least 74 people have been confirmed dead. The number of dead will almost certainly rise, since six are still missing, likely buried in the mud.

Local authorities described the scene as catastrophic, with entire structures swept away by a torrent of mud, rock, and debris. Far from being an unavoidable “natural” tragedy, the catastrophe is the entirely predictable outcome of chronic under-investment in public infrastructure, environmental degradation, and the austerity measures of the administration of President Prabowo Subianto.

According to early reports from the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), the landslide struck at approximately 2:30 a.m. local time, engulfing houses in Pasirlangu village on the slopes of Mount Burangrang. Residents were asleep, compounding the deadliness of the event.

At least 30 homes were destroyed, and over 200 people evacuated to shelters, where they were dependent on limited amounts of emergency supplies of food, clothes, and medicine. Rescue workers reported that the terrain remained dangerously unstable for days after the initial collapse, with repeated minor slides hampering search efforts. Among the dead were 23 members of Indonesia’s elite marine force, who had been training nearby.

The immediate trigger for the landslide was the extreme rainfall that had pounded West Java for days. Indonesia’s meteorological agency had issued warnings of severe weather for a full week prior to the disaster, noting the likelihood of heavy downpours and hydrometeorological hazards.

This landslide is the most deadly recent event, but it comes on the heels of a series of floods and landslides

that caused widespread destruction across South East Asia late last year. On the Indonesian island of Sumatra, at least 1,170 people were killed by severe flooding after a rare equatorial cyclone hit the island in November. Millions were affected by the widespread destruction of infrastructure.

The Bandung landslide was of a much smaller scale, but was no less a tragic event. The people worst affected in Pasirlangu and surrounding hamlets are poorer residents living in simple houses along the foothills of Mount Burangrang and near river channels—an area widely identified as prone to landslides and flash floods. Many rely on small farming, plantation labour and informal work; their homes, often self-built, lack engineering reinforcement and sit directly below steep, degraded slopes.

A local resident, Wawa, whose home was near the edge of the landslide, told Antara News about hearing the explosive sounds like a dam breaking, and evacuating with fellow residents. “More than 10 members of my family are missing. Their whereabouts are still unknown.”

The region’s geological instability is not new. West Bandung sits atop deeply weathered volcanic formations that are highly prone to landslides when saturated. The slopes of Mount Burangrang and the surrounding highlands have long been recognized as among the most dangerous in Indonesia.

Imam Achmad Sadisun, a geologist at Bandung Institute of technology, explained that the mudslide was caused by the breakdown of a natural landslide dam; the natural barrier allowed material and water to collect and saturate the mountain soil.

In the last several years alone, multiple landslides and mudflows have struck West Java, killing dozens and displacing thousands. In December 2024, floods and

landslides killed at least 10 people and caused widespread destruction. In early 2019, another landslide in West Java killed at least 15 people. While precise tallies vary, Indonesia records hundreds of landslides annually, with West Java consistently among the hardest-hit provinces.

The latest disaster is therefore part of a recurring pattern. The frequency of such events has increased in recent years, driven by deforestation, unregulated development, and the intensifying effects of climate change. The effects of deforestation in making such events more likely is known; the absence of tree roots makes slopes more unstable and the ground more prone to giving way. Climate scientists have also connected this pattern of repeated extreme rainfall and disaster to global climate change, noting that warmer sea-surface temperatures in surrounding oceans are increasing the likelihood of intense downpours during the monsoon.

The environmental group Walhi West Java drew attention to these facts, denouncing the government's role in the environmental degradation of the area, which made such disasters inevitable. "What happened yesterday for us is one form of neglect carried out by the district and provincial governments. Whereas for the past 20 years WALHI continues to voice that the KBU [North Bandung area] is experiencing continuous degradation," it stated.

Executive Director Wahyudin Iwang said that the landslide reflected years of activities that ignored spatial planning rules for the area. "This tragedy shows a lack of seriousness in protecting the environment," he said. "Damage is acknowledged only when lives are lost."

Despite the well-documented risks, the affected communities were left with little more than generic weather advisories. Residents of landslide-prone areas were simply told to "remain vigilant and evacuate immediately if [they] hear rumbling sounds, see soil movement or believe conditions are unsafe." There were no effective early-warning systems in place capable of detecting slope movement or alerting residents during the night.

Indonesia's national disaster framework nominally includes rainfall-threshold monitoring, automatic rain gauges, and community-based early-warning networks. In practice, however, these systems are patchy, underfunded, and unevenly implemented. Rural

districts like Cisarua and Pasirlangu—areas most vulnerable to landslides—are often the last to receive technological upgrades or infrastructure investment.

The austerity measures implemented by President Prabowo Subianto early in his term have also contributed to the further erosion of already limited public safety systems. The disaster management agency had 50 percent of its funding cut resulting in fewer field personnel, and delays in upgrading early-warning technologies.

The landslide and resulting deaths were the outcome of political decisions. Deforestation, quarrying, and unregulated construction in the Bandung highlands have all contributed to destabilizing slopes and increasing runoff during heavy rains. Climate change increases the severity of the monsoon seasons. The working people of Indonesia are being made to pay the price for a system that prioritizes military spending and corporate profit over public safety and social welfare.



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