Deadly Indonesian earthquake exposes unsafe housing and rescue cuts

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17 August 2026

At least 68 people have been killed and more than 200 injured after a powerful magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck the Indonesian island of Flores before dawn on August 15. Thousands have been driven from their homes and are awaiting aid, while rescue workers continue to search damaged buildings and communities isolated by landslides and blocked roads.

The earthquake struck at a shallow depth north of Flores and was caused by thrust movement along the Flores Back-Arc fault system. Indonesia's Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency issued its first tsunami warning just two minutes and 16 seconds after the quake. Tsunami waves were subsequently recorded at 16 locations, reaching 1.605 metres at Pota in East Manggarai. By late Monday morning, the agency had detected 1,624 aftershocks, including 23 above magnitude 5.

The desperate conditions confronting survivors were evident two days after the earthquake. In Ranukolo village, about 70 residents still lacked clean water, and children had developed diarrhoea. Residents said no aid had reached them. In nearby areas, families whose homes were no longer habitable were surviving on little more than plain rice. In Reo, one of the worst-hit communities, a resident asked: "Why isn't there a public kitchen?"

"We're on our own here," one resident, Junaidin, said to an Al Jazeera reporter. "As for help from the government, there hasn't been any—no tents, no medicine, no food, no drinking water, nothing."

These facts expose the lie that the death and destruction were simply an unavoidable "natural disaster." The earthquake itself was a geological event. However, the collapse of homes, damage to medical facilities, disruption of water supplies and delayed arrival of essential assistance are social questions, bound up with entrenched poverty and decades of government neglect.

A preliminary assessment by the National Disaster Management Agency on Sunday counted 2,403 damaged homes, including 1,543 that were severely damaged. At least 5,659 people had been displaced. Eighty-seven educational facilities, 50 places of worship and 76 government buildings were also damaged. At a damaged health centre near Ende, patients were treated in tents in the car park. The government announced that field hospitals would be established and appealed for neurosurgeons and orthopaedic specialists to treat head injuries and broken bones.

The government said it has deployed thousands of military and police personnel and transported hundreds of tonnes of aid into the disaster zone. But the continued absence of food, water, sanitation and medical care in a number of affected villages points to the inadequacy of the relief and rescue system.

Indonesia sits in one of the most earthquake-prone regions in the world, with dispersed communities across a mountainous island chain undoubtedly complicating relief operations. That only underscores the need for permanently staffed and equipped rescue, medical and logistics facilities rather than improvised operations.

The disaster cast a pall over official celebrations marking Indonesia's Independence Day on Monday. President Prabowo Subianto presided over ceremonies in Jakarta, 1,500 kilometres from the disaster zone. Prabowo is a former commander of the notorious Kopassus special forces under the Suharto dictatorship, implicated in atrocities in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh and in the abduction and torture of student activists during the regime's collapse in 1998. That

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such a figure could be rehabilitated and ultimately elevated to the presidency is itself an indictment of the entire post-Suharto political establishment and underscores the contempt in which Indonesia's ruling class holds the general population.

Asked about the celebrations, one displaced Flores resident told Reuters, "I don't think about that anymore… I just think about the safety of my wife and four-year-old twins." The gulf between the pageantry in the capital and the conditions confronting rural workers and poor families could hardly have been sharper.

No section of the Indonesian ruling elite can claim that the danger to Flores was unknown. In December 1992, another magnitude-7.7 earthquake and tsunami devastated the same island, killing around 2,500 people and leaving tens of thousands homeless.

The rapid tsunami warning on Saturday demonstrates the enormous advances made in scientific detection. But scientific knowledge alone cannot protect the population. It must be translated into earthquake-resistant homes, reinforced hospitals and schools, reliable roads, local evacuation infrastructure and adequately funded emergency services. Under capitalism, access to these basic protections is determined above all by wealth.

East Nusa Tenggara, the province that includes Flores, is among Indonesia's poorest regions. Official statistics classified 17.5 percent of its population—more than one million people—as poor in September 2025. In rural areas, the rate was 21.48 percent. Even these figures are based on an extraordinarily low poverty line of 563,052 rupiah ($US32) per person per month. Many families counted as being above the official line remain unable to finance major repairs, employ engineers or purchase the materials required to make their homes earthquake resistant.

The physical vulnerability of much of Indonesia's housing is well known. A 2025 review by the disaster-resilient housing organisation Build Change cited Statistics Indonesia data showing that almost 80 percent of residential buildings had been constructed without engineers or government oversight. A survey of more than 500 homes across three Indonesian regions, conducted with the World Bank and the Ministry of Public Works, found that just 11 percent met minimum earthquake-resistant standards.

Yet the burden of securing a safe home continues to be imposed on individual households. Across all of East Nusa Tenggara, only 436 homes were renovated under a government program in 2025. The provincial government announced a target of 5,000 renovations this year, partly supported through subsidised housing loans with repayment periods of up to 30 years. Such schemes leave impoverished workers, farmers and fishers dependent on their ability to incur and repay debt for protection against a well-established public danger.

The same class priorities are evident in emergency services. In January, parliament cut the 2026 budget of the national search-and-rescue agency Basarnas by 4.5 percent, from 1.55 trillion to 1.48 trillion rupiah. The cut was approved despite the agency chief's warning that its capacity required major improvement not reductions. Indonesia has 514 regional jurisdictions, but Basarnas maintains only 38 offices, one for each province.

By contrast, the Prabowo government's 2026 budget increased defence spending by an estimated 30 percent to 335.3 trillion rupiah. This is bound up with the chief priorities of the Prabowo government: participation in the US-led war preparations against China and the systemic restoration of military dominance in Indonesian society. In March of last year, Prabowo's government amended the TNI Law to allow active-duty military officers to serve in more civilian posts including, critically, the National Disaster Mitigation Agency.

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