

Indonesian tsunami relief grossly inadequate as death toll tops 1,200

By Tom Peters
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Three days after a 7.5 magnitude earthquake and 3 meter high tsunami devastated the Indonesian city of Palu and surrounding areas on the island of Sulawesi, the death toll is continuing to climb. The Chinese news agency Xinhua reported that 1,203 people were confirmed dead as of Monday afternoon.

The report was based on figures from Indonesian hospitals and agencies in Palu, with a population of 380,000, and nearby Donggala, home to 300,000 people, which was near the quake's epicentre. The toll does not include the dead from Parigi Mountong and North Mamuju, which were also badly hit.

Accounts from the area paint a horrifying picture of the disaster and its aftermath, made immeasurably worse by the lack of civil planning and the impoverished condition of masses of people. The vast majority of dwellings in Indonesia are not built to withstand tsunamis and earthquakes, despite the frequency of these disasters.

The country's tsunami early warning system is in a shambles due to underfunding and failed to gauge the severity of the deluge. A warning delivered following the earthquake by the country's geophysics agency, the BMKG, was lifted after only half an hour.

Several buildings in Palu collapsed metres into the ground, including a residential complex in the neighbourhood of Balaroa that was home to 900 people. An eight-story hotel, with an estimated 60 guests, was also reduced to rubble.

Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, from the Indonesian National Board for Disaster Management (BNPB), told the Associated Press that in the Petobo district, "it is estimated that there are still hundreds of victims buried in mud." Rescue workers have begun to fill a mass grave in Palu, which has a capacity for over 1,000 bodies and can be expanded if necessary.

Xinhua reported on Monday night: "The stench of dead bodies was intense around Palu's iconic Talise Beach, a popular tourism spot."

Search and rescue efforts have been severely hampered by a lack of heavy machinery, with most of the digging being done by hand. Many people spent days trapped in rubble, while the region has been shaken by more than 200 aftershocks.

Several villages are still inaccessible due to landslides. A Red Cross team found 34 bodies of students trapped inside a church in the village of Sigi, which they accessed only on Monday.

At least 59,000 people are homeless or displaced and essential supplies are running out. The United Nations Office said on Monday that a total of 191,000 people in affected areas urgently need aid including food, fuel, drinking water, medical personnel and tents. Palu and Donggala are without electricity and there are lengthy queues for fuel.

Doctors report that survivors are deeply traumatised and that there is a risk of water-borne diseases such as cholera, as well as malnutrition. BBC Indonesia's Rebecca Henschke, who is in Palu, told CBC Radio today: "The situation is very bleak. There's no power to the entire town so hospitals and medical clinics can't do complicated operations. They are running out of medical supplies and in most of them, the ones that we have been to, there's rows of bodies in plastic bags."

Henschke said people she had spoken to had not received the aid they need, and that "in terms of an organized aid operation, there's nothing like that here now."

Many people are furious at the lack of assistance. Thousands flocked to Palu's airport following the disaster, but they were not allowed to leave. The AP reported: "Video showed some of them screaming in

anger because they were not able to get on a departing military plane. ‘We have not eaten for three days!’ one woman yelled. ‘We just want to be safe!’”

Many journalists sent to the region reported being stopped by people begging for drinking water and other items. According to the International Red Cross, the aid that has so far reached the area is a “drop in the bucket” compared to what is needed.

President Joko Widodo told reporters on Sunday: “I’m aware there are a lot of issues that need to be resolved as soon as possible, and I hope the people will remain patient in this situation.” The government has so far allocated just \$38 million for disaster relief.

Meanwhile, soldiers and police have been deployed to defend private property and suppress starved and desperate people who have entered shops looking for food and other supplies. The media and politicians have demonised such people as “looters.”

The *New York Times* reported that Sarah Wati, a 20-year-old unemployed mother, was treated in hospital after being shot in the foot when police officers “sprayed bullets” at a group of people attempting to get access to an ATM with pickaxes, as well as several onlookers.

According to the *Jakarta Post* “police are reported to have ordered a shoot on sight policy against such robbers.”

Foreign governments have pledged a pittance in aid. Britain has made available \$2.6 million, the European Union \$1.7 million, South Korea \$1 million and New Zealand \$1 million. Australia’s government has said it is “ready to help Indonesia” but made no precise offer. US President Donald Trump said he offered “warmest condolences” to those affected by the tsunami, but so far Washington has not announced any specific aid.

By contrast, the ruling elites of these countries are collectively spending trillions of dollars on wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the militarisation of the Asia-Pacific region.

The worsening humanitarian catastrophe in Central Sulawesi is an indictment of capitalism. Fourteen years after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that killed more than 167,000 people, the majority of them in Indonesia, the latest tsunami reveals that nothing whatsoever has been done to prepare for such events.

It has rapidly emerged that the country’s antiquated tsunami warning system has not been functioning

correctly since at least 2012, with 22 buoys designed to provide key information no longer operational.

Rahmat Triyono, the head of the BMKG’s tsunami and earthquake department, told BBC Indonesia this week that, “Our tools are very lacking. In fact, of the 170 earthquake sensors we have, we only have a maintenance budget for 70 sensors.” Sutopo, of the BNPB, likewise stated on Sunday: “If we look at the funding, it has decreased every year.”

The buoys, and the warning system as a whole, failed in 2016, when a tsunami was triggered by a 7.8 magnitude earthquake. Sutopo explained afterwards that much of the system’s infrastructure was no longer operational due to a lack of maintenance, caused by funding cuts and vandalism.

In the two years since, nothing has been done to fix the system, or to upgrade it to a more advanced model designed in the wake of the 2004 tsunami. The new system has been in the “testing phase” for over a decade, with the country’s disaster agencies unable to raise the 1 billion rupiah (\$A95,500) required to complete the project.

The utter indifference of the Indonesian ruling elite, and its imperialist partners, to the safety of ordinary people is inextricably tied to the dramatic growth of social inequality and the super-exploitation of the working class in “developing” countries.

Indonesia is the sixth most unequal country in the world. Its ruling elite has enriched itself through the exploitation of masses of workers and rural poor, which are offered up as ultra-cheap labour for local and transnational businesses. Even the most basic measures to mitigate the impact of natural disasters are seen as an unacceptable impost on profits.

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