

# Catastrophic floods hit Indonesian capital

By Owen Howell  
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A torrential downpour in Jakarta and the surrounding provinces of West Java and Banten on New Year's Eve caused a catastrophic flood that has killed 67 people and displaced hundreds of thousands. Rivers burst their banks, overturning cars and completely submerging single-storey houses. It is Jakarta's deadliest flood since the 2007 deluge, which killed 80 people.

According to the Meteorology, Climatology, and Geophysical Agency (BMKG), an estimated 377 millimetres of rain fell in one day, Jakarta's heaviest rainfall since records began in 1866. Within hours of the downpour, the water had risen nearly eight metres in some areas. The state weather agency has forecasted more extreme rainfall later in the month and until the rainy season ends in April.

Floodwaters submerged 74 districts across the city's metropolitan area, including 12 districts of inner-city Jakarta, many of which had never previously been affected by flooding. More than 1,300 homes in poorer neighbourhoods have been devastated, and thousands more heavily damaged. Residents have drowned, some died of hypothermia or were electrocuted. Hundreds of thousands have abandoned their homes and sought refuge in damp overcrowded emergency shelters.

The heavy rain caused mudslides in hilly areas on the capital's outskirts that buried dozens of people. On Sunday the search for buried victims of a massive landslide in the impoverished rural district of Sukajaya in West Java was ended after two weeks. The mudslides destroyed over 400 houses, displaced 4,000 farmers and workers, and claimed six lives. Several remain missing.

Across Jakarta, 724 power stations were shut down by the state-owned electricity company PLN as a precaution, after a 16-year-old boy was electrocuted by a power line. Public transport operations were disrupted, and the Halim Perdanakusuma Airport was temporarily closed due to submerged runways.

Blackouts and lack of telecommunications hampered search efforts. Water and electricity supplies were still cut long after the floods receded. Residents had to use rafts to navigate through waterlogged roads and floating debris. One Jakarta resident, Pudji, said she had to wait 22 hours on her roof before she was rescued, the *Economist* reported.

In response, the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) dispatched relief items, deployed personnel, and established evacuation centres for victims. The Indonesian Red Cross deployed volunteers and staff to the affected areas, and is also providing first aid and health services. More than 1,000 soldiers and health workers have sprayed Jakarta to fend off possible waterborne diseases such as dengue and leptospirosis, which could spread from the floodwaters that have pooled around the capital.

President Joko Widodo visited a number of the hardest-hit villages, including in Lebak regency in Banten where 19 schools were damaged. He had planned to meet with the residents of the buried hamlets in Sukajaya, but the ground was too unstable for his helicopter to land.

Java was not the only region to be inundated by heavy rain. Throughout the Indonesian archipelago at least 169 areas were affected by floods. In the weeks leading up to the New Year's Eve downpour, flash floods destroyed bridges and damaged villages in several provinces on the island of Sumatra. A family of five people went missing in Labuhan Batu regency, North Sumatra, apparently swept away on the river along with their house, in a flood that wrecked 229 homes. Floods in West Sumatra, Bengkulu, and Central Sulawesi have resulted in fatalities and left thousands homeless.

President Widodo did not hesitate to blame the poorest sections of the Indonesian working class for the disaster. He stated that flooding was brought on by

workers converting land into residential areas and not disposing of rubbish properly, according to local newspaper *Kompas*.

For years Widodo has promised to improve Jakarta's flood defences by building two dams and beginning construction work on the walls of the Ciliwung River. Those projects, however, have been plagued by delays. On January 2, he told reporters, "The most important thing at the moment is that evacuation of victims, safety, and security of the community take precedence. Later on, flood infrastructure will be handled after the evacuation handling is complete."

As in other countries, Indonesian workers and the rural masses are furious at the indifference of the government and ruling elites to their plight in times of natural disaster. After the 2007 disaster, a flood in 2013 killed 47 people and submerged much of the city's less developed districts when canals overflowed. And yet the response of successive governments has been characterised by insufficient investment in flood prevention infrastructure or, at worst, criminal negligence.

Indonesia is undergoing a historic transformation from a largely rural to urban society, with over 68 percent of the population expected to be living in cities within the next five years, according to the World Bank. The country's rapid urbanisation, however, is regulated by private interests, as seen in the prioritisation of clean drinking water for residents in Jakarta's wealthy districts, whose use of groundwater has led to the sinking of the megacity. Delik Hudalah, a researcher at the Institute of Technology in Bandung, found that governments had been so negligent that the current character of the city has been shaped almost entirely by the private business sector.

The floods have ignited discussion in Indonesian news outlets and social media about growing social inequality. Elisa Sutanudjaja, director of the Jakarta-based Rujak Centre for Urban Studies, said: "The rich are able to save themselves at the expense of other neighbourhoods... In a climate crisis, [the poor] are the first victims, and the last ones to get help."

An aerial photo posted on Twitter showed the pristine grounds of Jakarta's Shangri-La Hotel unaffected by the downpour, while the adjacent poor *kampung* (neighbourhood) was submerged in muddy floodwaters. The photo generated much conversation

on how the floods had laid the country's inequality bare.

Last Friday, *Tempo* reported on an ominous new development. Jakarta Police Chief Nana Sudjana announced the formation of a new task force designed to "deal with" extreme weather catastrophes, consisting of "police, armed forces, and related agencies."

The government's fear is that the widespread anger stirred up by the flood disaster could develop into a mass movement against social inequality, poverty and the Indonesian ruling class that presides over it. Jakarta, a sinking megacity of 35 million people faced with growing congestion and air pollution, is a social explosion waiting to happen.

However, the problems of Jakarta are simply a concentrated expression of the grotesque levels of social inequality across Indonesia and throughout the region. Faced with further demonstrations and public outrage, the Widodo administration is preparing police-state measures, as it has done in the brutal state repression of demonstrations in West Papua over the past four months.

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