

At least 96 killed, nearly 70,000 displaced as quake, floods hit Indonesia



The quakes have forced about 28,000 people to take shelter in 25 evacuation centres in the city of Mamuju. PHOTO: AFP

JAKARTA (XINHUA, AFP) - The death toll from a strong earthquake and floods in the central parts of Indonesia has risen to 96, with nearly 70,000 people forced to flee home and take shelter, the National Disaster Management Agency said on Monday (Jan 18).

A total of 81 people were killed after the 6.2-magnitude quake and the 5.9-magnitude aftershock struck West Sulawesi province last Thursday and Friday, and 15 people were reported dead in South Kalimantan province as floods have hit the province since Jan 14, the agency's spokesman Raditya Jati said.

The quakes have forced about 28,000 people to take shelter in 25 evacuation centres in West Sulawesi province's city of Mamuju and district of Majene, while the floods caused nearly 40,000 others to take shelter in South Kalimantan province, Mr. Jati said.

The number of houses damaged by the quakes rose to 1,150 units in the district, and five school buildings were also destroyed there, he said.

The assessment of risks of the quakes in the city and district was still going on, Mr Jati said.

Medics battled exhaustion and the risk of Covid-19 as they raced on Monday to treat scores of people injured by the quake.

Masked doctors treated patients with broken limbs and other injuries at a makeshift medical centre set up outside the only one of the city's hospitals that survived the quake relatively intact.

“The patients keep coming,” operations manager Nurwardi from Mamuju’s West Sulawesi General Hospital, told Agence France-Presse.

“This is the only hospital operating in the city. Many need surgery but we have limited resources and medicine.”

The open-air triage centre was desperately short of staff, and those on hand worked frantically despite the risk of contracting coronavirus.

The hospital was scrambling to open up more rooms for surgery and erect additional tents outside to treat the injured, said the operations manager Nurwardi, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

But fears that another quake could bring down the building were adding to the challenges.

“Many patients do not want to be treated inside the hospital because they’re worried about another quake,” manager Nurwardi said. “Well, it’s not only them, the medics are...scared of being inside the building too.”

It was still unclear how many people – dead or alive – could still be under mountains of debris, as rescuers rushed to find survivors more than three days after the disaster.

Still trapped

Most of the 81 dead were found in Mamuju, but some bodies were also recovered south of the city of 110,000 people in West Sulawesi province.

Last Friday’s tremor triggered panic among residents of the island, which was hit by a 2018 quake-tsunami disaster that killed thousands.

At least 18 people had been pulled out of the rubble alive, including a pair of young sisters, according to official data.

Police began using sniffer dogs to help in the search at a badly damaged hospital, as body bags were filled with recovered corpses.

“There are probably some people still trapped under the rubble,” search and rescue agency spokesman Yusuf Latif said on Monday.

Meanwhile, about 19,000 people left homeless by the quake took refuge at dozens of makeshift shelters – many little more than tarpaulin-covered tents filled with whole families.

They said they were running low on food, blankets and other aid, as emergency supplies were rushed to the hard-hit region.

Many survivors were unable to return to their destroyed homes, or were too scared to go back, fearing a tsunami sparked by aftershocks, common after strong earthquakes.

Fearing an outbreak of coronavirus in the crowded camps, authorities were trying to separate high- and low-risk groups.

Rapid tests will also be applied to them and the shelters for the displaced people will be separated from each other, according to the agency's head Doni Monardo.

"There will be antigen tests to ensure that the evacuees have not been infected by the Covid-19 virus," Mr Monardo said.

Meanwhile, in South Kalimantan province, the floods have inundated nearly 25,000 houses, Mr Jati said.

An emergency status has been declared there since Jan 14 and the risk assessment has been undertaken, he added.

The province has been hit by massive floods since Jan 14 after heavy rains pounded the area, according to the agency.