

INDONESIA: MOUNT MERAPI/VOLCANIC ACTIVITY

25 January 2001

Information Bulletin N° 1

The Situation

Indonesian scientists are closely monitoring the Mount Merapi volcano (elevation 3000 m) in central Java, which has been spewing ash and lava for the past few weeks. There is fear of an imminent eruption. Thousands of people, who live around the volcano - considered to be the most volatile of Indonesia's 129 active volcanoes - have been instructed to prepare for evacuation. Clouds of scorching poisonous gas billow from the main crater, while lava flows are carving out trails down the mountain's slopes. Seismographs are presently registering less activity than over the last few days, and scientists say that the current activity could go on for weeks - or there could be a major development at any moment.

Red hot rocks, thrown up by the rumbling volcano, have been projected within a radius of four miles from Mount Merapi. Volcanic dust and ashes have fallen on neighbouring areas. Four heavily populated districts surround Mount Merapi: Sleman (Yogyakarta province), Magelang, Boyolali and Klaten (central Java province) with a total of 13 villages in two districts identified as potential disaster zones. The city of Yogyakarta is approximately 25 km south of the volcano with a population of over one million. Geologists report that the mountain is most likely to erupt in a southwesterly direction, toward the 1,100 year old Buddhist temple at Borobudur, which is a major tourist attraction. Tourist destinations around the mountain have been closed.

Approximately 8,000 people living in the 13 identified villages have been instructed to be "prepared" the next status being an "alert" to evacuate their homes. Local authorities have, however, reminded the villagers of the dangers of unpredictable heat clouds which could descend without warning. During Mount Merapi's last eruption in 1996, 60 people died when heat clouds engulfed the village of Turgo.

Indonesian government activities •

Local authorities have advised villagers living near Mount Merapi, including those living on the volcano's slopes, to stop farming and sand or scoria/cinder mining. Potentially, those most at risk are the migrant workers who work in the scoria industry, as they are not as connected to the informal local information networks which play an important role in communications in the area. Local farmers are reportedly

reluctant to leave their homes, finding reassurance with local shamans, who claim to have soothed the mountain's volatile spirits.

So far, the Indonesian authorities have led the preparedness activities. Evacuation routes and meeting points have been mapped out and information disseminated to the populace. The Satkorlak PB (coordinating body for disasters at provincial level) and Satlak PB (at the district level) are anticipating potential developments, should Merapi erupt. Institutions included in Satkorlak/Satlak coordination are as follows: the body of research and vulcanology, Yogyakarta, which monitors volcanic activity and ensures early warning, the local government structure which provides evacuation lanes and temporary shelter, the public hospital and the local health department which deals with surveillance and public awareness. Also represented are local basarnas dealing with search and rescue, the sub-dolog warehouse which has a food stock of rice and the local army which provides vehicles and platoon tents. The Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) has branches in the four districts of Sleman, Magelang, Boyolali and Klaten.

Red Cross/Red Crescent Action

The Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) branches in the four districts each have dozens of volunteers who are already involved in preparedness measures, although more volunteers are likely to be needed if Merapi does erupt and there is a fully-fledged disaster. In an emergency situation, the PMI branch volunteers will be involved in the evacuation of people, providing and manning public kitchens and carrying out distributions of relief materials. The branches have a good relationship with the local PBs in preparing temporary shelters and providing information and advice to communities, including distribution of leaflets with information on volcanic hazards. The volunteers have received extensive briefings on the coordination system in pre-disaster and disaster situations.

Needs

At present, the Indonesian government and domestic agencies, including the PMI, are working to ensure appropriate preparedness. However, should the volcano erupt, there may be a need for external assistance. Further information will be provided as the situation evolves.

Additional details are available from Ewa Eriksson of the Asia & Pacific Department: eriksson@ifrc.org.

For daily updates on Mount Merapi see: <http://www.geo.mtu.edu/volcanoes/merapi/> or <http://www.vsi.dpe.go.id/news/>.

Peter Rees-Gildea
Head a.i.
Relationship Management Department

Hiroshi Higashiura
Head
Asia & Pacific Department

This and other reports on Federation operations are available on the Federation's website: <http://www.ifrc.org>