

International

# Indonesia's earthquake-tsunami battered city faces health crisis

## Torrential rains threaten to spread malaria, dengue fever

**JAKARTA:** Indonesia's quake-tsunami battered city of Palu is facing a public health crisis as torrential rains threaten to spread malaria and dengue fever to the devastated region a month after the disaster, aid agencies have warned. On September 28, a magnitude 7.5 quake and a subsequent tsunami razed swathes of Palu on Sulawesi island, killing some 2,200 people and displacing more than 220,000.

Thousands more are missing, presumed dead, after entire neighborhoods were swallowed up by liquefaction - a process where a strong quake makes the ground start behaving like a liquid, turning it into a kind of quicksand. Desperate to stave off disease, authorities last week dropped disinfectant from helicopters on the worst-hit parts of Palu, where some 5,000 rotting corpses are feared buried beneath the ruins. Indonesia's disaster mitigation agency said the move was crucial to preventing the proliferation of disease-laden flies, cockroaches and rats.

But aid groups say there has been an increase in cases of diarrhoea and respiratory infection, while there are also suspected cases of mosquito-borne illnesses, including malaria and dengue fever. Heavy monsoon rains predicted for the months ahead threaten to make a bad situation worse. "It is likely we're going to see more and more people getting sick... given how hard it is to maintain hygiene standards, with the rains providing the perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes, and with hundreds, if not thousands of bodies, believed to be decomposing in the ground," said Selina Sumbung, chairperson of Save the Children's partner in Indonesia, Yayasan Sayangi Tunas Cilik.



### Deadly quake killed 2,200

#### 'Difficult to keep clean'

Safe play spaces and temporary schools have provided some solace for kids - including many left orphans or still separated from surviving parents - but children are at particular risk from any illness outbreak. Local and international relief efforts have accelerated over the past month after initial delays sparked looting as food and water ran out. Telephone reception and electricity have been restored to many areas with shops, restaurants and markets open.

Disaster agency spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho said Friday that things were "getting better" for people in the worst-affected areas. But numerous challenges remain. The hundreds of thousands left homeless by the disaster are scattered across Palu and beyond. Many squat outside their ruined homes or are bunkered down in makeshift camps and entirely dependent on hand-outs to survive. Safe drinking water has to be trucked into encampments, while tarpaulins, blankets and tools are still in short supply in some areas.

"We know when people are living in temporary conditions - in tents or under tarpaulins - that always poses a problem for hygiene," said Andreas Weissenberg, team leader of the Red Cross field assessment team in Palu. "People stay closer together. It's difficult to keep clean. They may not have access to water and latrines." Elsewhere, monsoon rains have already turned roads to mud and primed slopes for landslides in some remote areas - hampering access for relief teams. Indonesian authorities lifted a state of emergency on Friday, after which a "transition period" is to continue before



**PALU, Indonesia:** Indonesian workers work on a damaged bridge hit by quake-tsunami in Palu. Indonesia's deadly quake-tsunami has left scores of children orphaned while others are still separated from surviving parents a month after the disasters, as torrential monsoon rain threaten to spark a public health crisis, aid group warn. —AFP

that ends on December 25.

Indonesia has said that damage to the devastated area has topped \$900 million while the World Bank has offered the country up to \$1 billion in loans to get Palu back on its feet. Seventy percent of Palu has been cleaned up and water supply will return to normal by December, Central Sulawesi governor Longki

Djanggola said Thursday. More than 1,400 tents have been erected for classes and 1,200 semi-permanent shelters - each with a dozen rooms - are expected to be finished in two months' time. For many, however, life is still far from returning to normal. "I just hope I can get a decent place, permanent housing and a job," said 65-year-old Abdurrahim Laadu. —AFP

## Afghans risk their lives to vote in delayed election

**KANDAHAR:** Afghans risked their lives to vote in legislative elections in southern Afghanistan yesterday, after the Taliban-claimed killing of a powerful police chief delayed the ballot by a week. Turbanned men and burqa-clad women stood in long, segregated queues outside polling centres in the deeply conservative Kandahar provincial capital, which was blanketed with heavy security in anticipation of militant attacks.

More than half a million people—the vast majority of them men—are registered to vote in Kandahar province where more than 100 candidates are competing for 11 lower-house seats. Organizers are under pressure to avoid last weekend's debacle that forced the Independent Election Commission (IEC) to extend the nationwide ballot by a day. Problems with untested biometric verification devices, missing or incomplete voter rolls and absent election workers following Taliban threats to attack the ballot forced Afghans to wait hours outside polling stations, many of which opened late or not at all. —AFP

## Sri Lanka's former strongman makes a dramatic comeback

**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's former strongman leader Mahinda Rajapakse, who was controversially sworn in as the new prime minister, is a charismatic leader whose human rights record had attracted widespread international censure. Since failing to win a third term as president and being defeated by his erstwhile party secretary Maithripala Sirisena in January 2015, Rajapakse 72, has attempted to stage a comeback.

His appointment on Friday night as the new premier was as controversial as his decade in power. Rajapakse crushed Tamil rebels in a no-holds-barred military campaign to end the country's long-running civil war in May 2009. His decisive military action sparked allegations that at least 40,000 minority Tamil civilians were killed by government forces while putting down the 37-year conflict that had claimed at least 100,000 lives.

Despite being cold shouldered by the West, he is a charismatic leader hugely popular among the majority Sinhalese community for crushing the Tamil Tiger rebels who were known for their trade mark suicide bombings. Rajapakse's success in overseeing an end to

the war propelled him to a huge election victory and a second term in office in 2010. Soon after his 2015 defeat, he blamed it on the minority Tamil community which voted overwhelmingly for Maithripala Sirisena who pledged accountability for alleged war-time atrocities by the military.

Ironically, it was Sirisena who made Rajapakse his prime minister after his surprise sacking of Ranil Wickremesinghe whose United National Party (UNP) helped Sirisena win the 2015 election. Rajapakse, a lawyer by profession, also accused India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing, of being behind his stunning defeat. Traditional ally India was angry over Rajapakse allowing Chinese submarines to dock at Colombo during his last year in office as president. But recently, he appeared to have mended fences with India and met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi last month.

#### Street-fighter politician

Political commentator Kusal Perera said Rajapakse remained the most popular Sinhala-Buddhist leader in the country and his dramatic return to power was historic. "Rajapakse, as the most charismatic Sinhala Buddhist leader... has made a formidable comeback never known in Sri Lankan electoral history," Perera said. Critics say Rajapakse lost elections in January and August 2015 because of nepotism and fail-



**COLOMBO:** Sri Lanka's former president and new Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse arrives at a temple after having been sworn in as prime minister in Colombo. —AFP

ure to deal with huge corruption under his rule. He oversaw a period of growing prosperity with average growth rates of 7.5 percent, built Sri Lanka's first expressway and rolled out new highways and railroads.

But his ambitious infrastructure projects ended up as white elephants and left the country facing a mountain of debt, including commercial loans from China. Unable to service the

debt, the government last year leased a Chinese-built deep sea port in the south of the island to a Beijing company for \$1.12 billion. Another loss-making airport built with more than \$300 million in Chinese loans is up for privatization. The new government launched several investigations into charges Rajapakse and his family siphoned off billions of dollars, but prosecutions were extremely slow. —AFP

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