



The disaster the world forgot too soon

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Rural Indonesians are in real need but they're not in the public eye.

DRIVING slowly through the narrow streets of the village, we passed houses in various stages of ruin: many largely destroyed, some reduced to rubble. Buildings that remained teetered precariously, leaning walls propped up with bamboo poles.

Children scurried around tiny, flimsy tents set up to shelter the homeless. Elderly people lay on planks across the rubble with makeshift plastic awnings their only protection from the sun. Mothers with children at their breast sat on piles of broken bricks, all that was left of their homes. Outside each village, makeshift placards announced how many had been killed and injured.

No, this isn't Kashmir, Afghanistan or Iraq. It was Imogiri, just outside Indonesia's cultural capital and tourist magnet, Yogyakarta. The area was hit by a massive earthquake on May 27, measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale. It lasted for only a minute but, more than five months later, the countryside is still devastated, with 354,000 houses lost.

Aid has arrived from around the world, including, among many others, Indonesian businesses, the Kuwaiti Red Crescent, AusAID and the usual major donors, such as Oxfam, but progress has been slow and patchy at best. Oxfam says Indonesian governments, cen-

tral and local, have so far failed to build a single house, and locals are angry, claiming the money promised by their government has yet to reach them.

Tragically, the situation is about to get much, much worse. In a week or so, the rainy season will start. The flimsy tents will do little to protect the homeless. Today's dust and rubble will quickly turn to mud and flood, and shattered septic and drainage systems will produce disease.

Already respiratory illness is increasing and experts predict more of that and the horrors of mosquito-borne disease as well. This means the future offers little but still more suffering for the rural poor of Java, who this year have also faced eruptions from Mount Merapi near Yogya and a catastrophic mud-flood in Sidoarjo.

The initial outflow of sympathy, funds and supplies during the first few weeks after the quake, while heart-warming, was insufficient. It is estimated that more than 1½ million people are still homeless in central Java.

Incredibly, most Indonesians don't know or care much about Yogya's earthquake — foreigners even less so. The tsunami, by contrast, killed tourists in Thailand and Sri Lanka — and ended the war in Aceh — so it caught the attention of Westerners, who gave generously. Unfortunately, the

tsunami seems to have exhausted compassion and disposable cash for the poor of South-East Asia.

But not everyone has forgotten. We hear a lot about thinking globally and acting locally, but one of the few to take it seriously is Warwick Purser, an Australian businessman. Ten years ago, when Purser set up Out of Asia, now Indonesia's largest exporter of handicrafts, he based his operations in Tembi, a village 30 minutes from Yogyakarta. His business benefited greatly from the skill of the villagers, but so did they.

Purser employed hundreds of locals and Tembi developed from a poor rural village into a model community, with Purser as the unofficial ruler. Not only did he provide jobs, but also schools, health clinics, and even gamelan and dancing classes. Tembi was reborn.

When the earthquake hit Yogya and its environs, it knocked down half of Purser's compound and 90 per cent of the village. Everything still standing was badly damaged. A lifetime collection of irreplaceable art and books were destroyed. Purser is pouring money — his own and donations — into reconstructing Tembi as fast as he can, in an effort to beat the rain.

Another example is Iskandar Waworuntu, a local Muslim sufi and environmentalist who is



using his own money and contributions from friends to build replacement houses and schools for the Yogyakarta homeless. These are simple and affordable constructions of timber and plastered bamboo, but they are functional. Like Purser's homes, they are based on traditional Javanese house designs. Both are therefore much more attractive and liveable than the few depressing (and more expensive) rough brick boxes being thrown up now, which will destroy the unique character of central Java's villages.

The selfless work of Purser and Wawarontu will save lives and preserve some communities but it is nowhere near enough to fix the mess that now exists, or to prevent the second,

looming tragedy promised by the rainy season. Yogyakarta needs many, many more like Purser and Wawarontu, quickly.

Some Indonesians are now asking why the Yogyakarta homeless have to look to foreign donors, committed foreigners and a few Indonesians with limited means to do what should primarily be the responsibility of their own Government.

After all, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was elected on a platform of ending corruption and improving the delivery of government services.

Natural disasters are a fact of life for Indonesia, sitting as it does on a ring of volcanic fire. So why isn't it better prepared? Why has it made such a mess of

disaster relief in both Aceh and Yogyakarta? Or is it another case of the centre forgetting the regions, ignoring the masses of rural poor, because they have so little political clout?

We can't help thinking the Government's reactions would be different if the 1.5 million were homeless in Jakarta with the rainy season looming.

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