

# Indonesia, earthquake and tsunami: Sulawesi, East of Java

Tuesday 9 October 2018, by [VARAGUR Krithika](#) (Date first published: 9 October 2018).

Friday, 28 September was the first and, it turned out, only day of the Nomoni cultural festival in Palu, a city in the heart of Indonesia's Sulawesi island. Nomoni means 'resounding' or 'ringing' in the indigenous Kaili language; Palu's mayor revived the vaguely animist celebration three years ago to attract more tourists. Festivities include throwing live goats and food as offerings into the sea, boat races and live music.

Last year, Nomoni was met with heavy rain and floods – a bad omen, but nothing compared to what happened this year, when the city was pulverised by a magnitude 7.5 earthquake and the tsunami that followed it. They struck at around 6 p.m., when Muslims were performing the last of their day's prayers and Nomoni festivalgoers were taking sunset selfies. The ground beneath their feet liquefied. The death toll is 2000 and rising.

Some people in Palu, without better explanations or serviceable aid, see the disaster as 'punishment' for the animist festival, a harder warning than last year. 'They think the mayor was trying to invoke demons,' according Ronny Buol, a photographer from the North Sulawesi city of Manado, who has been volunteering in Palu for the last ten days. Someone put up a hand-painted plywood sign [1]: 'The victims of the Palu tsunami are a result of the Palu Nomoni making Palu cry.'

The mayor and other regional officials quickly absconded after the quake. 'In the first day or two after the crisis there were corpses scattered everywhere, right in the middle of the city, and they were just left there,' Adriany Badrah, a resident of Palu, told the *Indonesia* at Melbourne blog. 'Families were left to try to identify the dead themselves.' [2] Some people escaped to the more populous islands of Java or Borneo; the governor of Sulawesi angrily told them not to bother coming back [3]. The federal government announced this week that it would stop looking for people on 11 October. At least 5000 are still missing and more than 70,000 have been displaced. The international news cycle is moving on.

It's hard to shake the feeling that name recognition (or a lack of it) is a factor in the chaotic response. When Mount Agung on Bali started smoking last year, it made world headlines for months; Mount Sinabung, in a less-visited part of Sumatra, erupting continuously since 2013, has created a semi-permanent settlement of volcano refugees who are unlikely to receive further aid. Most well-meaning observers need to ask where Sulawesi is: east of Borneo, I usually say, south of the Philippines, quite far from nearly anywhere else in Asia that comes to mind. Indonesia is also wider than the continental United States, and Sulawesi is a long way from Java, the nation's centre of government and resources.

Still, did it have to be this bad? Indonesia seemed to be caught completely off-guard by the quake, but it is one of the most seismically active countries on earth. Five days after the tsunami, a volcano erupted on another part of Sulawesi. A quake is not an epoch-marking event; it's a leitmotif of ordinary life. President Joko Widodo only reluctantly agreed to accept foreign aid several days after the event, hesitantly for the first time since the catastrophic 2004 Boxing Day tsunami. Meanwhile, the early warning systems installed after that tsunami had fallen into disrepair; Indonesia's Disaster

Management Agency admitted that the buoys meant to record changes in sea level have been defunct since 2012. The annual disaster monitoring budget has fallen by 65 per cent over the same periods. But there are alternatives to expensive technology, such as education.

Adam Switzer researches tsunamis at the National Observatory of Singapore ‘I was astonished to see people still standing at the coast when the tsunami arrived,’ he told me. ‘Every Indonesian child needs to learn about natural hazards’ and ‘anyone living at the coast should know the first thing to do when they feel an earthquake’: find a safe spot to wait out the tremors, then move inland or to higher ground for several hours.

The exact details of last month’s seismic event are still unclear; Switzer described it as a complex ‘earthquake with coincident tsunamis, landslides; liquefaction and slumps’ that will take months to unravel. The elongated shape of Palu Bay magnified the effects of the quake, which would not ordinarily have produced such strong waves.

Rather than an isolated tragedy, the Palu tsunami should be seen as part of a recurring phenomenon, which wasn’t always so devastating in the region. The historical record on Indonesian tsunamis is thin because they weren’t always understood as seismic events so much as ‘freak waves or floods’, according to the historian Anthony Reid [4]. All the same, traditional Sumatran and Javanese architecture was relatively earthquake-proof: often built of wood, bamboo and thatch, and using no arches, pillars or halls. ‘Before 20<sup>th</sup>-century changes in urbanisation and building styles,’ Reid writes,

*“Indonesians themselves were little affected by earthquakes, and appear to have avoided settling in large numbers on the coasts of Nias, western Sumatra and southern Java which were exposed to tsunamis. The people of Nias, probably the most vulnerable to tsunamis of all complex Indonesian societies, spurned their coasts completely before sea-based Dutch infrastructure arrived in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.”*

Large port cities make little sense in Indonesia, given its geography, but they suited the needs of maritime European traders and colonists. Palu became a maritime port for the Dutch East India Company around 1700 and came under direct Dutch rule in 1905. The colonial legacy means that Indonesia is full of time bombs, precarious coastal cities susceptible to seismic events, including Jakarta. While a degree of physical destruction may be inevitable, the loss of human life can be minimised, particularly with education.

Simeulue, an Acehnese fishing island, survived the 2004 tsunami with remarkably few casualties – just seven out of 86,735 residents – thanks to its indigenous tradition of songs, poems and folktales that explain how when the ground starts to tremble, you should wait out the tremors, then move inland or to higher ground [5]. Many lives were saved on Simeulue not by buoys, text alerts, government aid or luck, but by stories.

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**P.S.**

• London Review of Books, 9 October 2018:  
<https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2018/10/09/krithika-varagur/sulawesi-east-of-java/?utm>

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## Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.hidayatullah.com/berita/nasional/read/2018/10/04/152050/nomoni-membuat-palu-menangis.html>
- [2] <http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/families-were-left-to-try-to-identify-the-dead-themselves/>
- [3] <http://kaltim.prokal.co/read/news/341820-gubernur-sulteng-sakit-hati-bilang-yang-tinggalkan-palu-jangan-kembali.html>
- [4] <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-southeast-asian-studies/article/two-hitherto-unknown-indonesian-tsunamis-of-the-seventeenth-century-probabilities-and-context/8C09FD4A56C56940F8D9CD9BBB2047AD>
- [5] <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1878029614000711>