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Floods Recede Across Indonesian Capital

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JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) -- The stench of fuel fumes and rotting garbage wafted through soaked streets Wednesday and residents dragged out dripping bedding, carpets and clothing as flood waters receded from a disaster that has killed at least 50 people.

Floods waters remained in many districts of the capital, especially in low-lying areas close to rivers where mostly poor Jakartans live. Electricity and power supplies to much of the city of 12 million people were still cut off.

"In general, the water is continuing to recede further and many people are returning home," said city spokesman Arie Budhiman. "I would like to say that the worst has passed us, but the weather can't be predicted."

In one hard-hit neighborhood, storm waters dropped almost as quickly as they had arrived, leaving behind a layer of thick, black muck and tangled debris.

"We can't live in a filthy and smelly house like," said Grace Liawati, an insurance company executive, scrubbing dirt off the wall. "We are staying with our relatives who are safe from flooding."

At a local military medical post, where around 4,000 people are being fed every day, hundreds lined up for medicine to treat diarrhea, skin irritation and respiratory problems.

The death toll from the floods, which at their peak forced some 340,000 people from their homes, rose to at least 50, the Health Ministry said. Most of the fatalities were due to drowning or electrocution.

The cost to the country so far is estimated to be some \$452 million, planning minister Paskah Suzzeta said.

Foreign countries donated money and aid agencies distributed badly needed soap, towels and hygiene kits in the capital, even as the Indonesian government said it would not issue a formal request for international assistance.

The European Commission pledged \$775,000, the United States gave \$100,000 and the Netherlands - Indonesia's former colonial ruler - separately offered \$1.3 million.

Thousands of people have sought shelter in government buildings, schools and mosques to escape their flooded homes. Overcrowding and unsanitary conditions sparked fears of a rampant spread of waterborne diseases.

On Tuesday, around 1,000 people were sharing two bathrooms and sleeping side-by-side on the cold floor at one refugee center located in a school.

"There is a shortage of baby food and blankets," said Alamsyah, a district official as he oversaw the preparation of pots of rice and instant noodles. "We need more supplies," said Alamsyah, who like many Indonesians goes by a single name.

Landslides and floods kill hundreds across Indonesia each year, and the capital is not immune. But the floods this time around have been the worst in recent memory, residents said, washing indiscriminately into poor districts, middle-class housing estates, hospitals, schools and shops.

Major floods last occurred in 2002 in the city, much of which is below sea level.

Environmentalists blame rivers clogged with rubbish, rampant construction of shopping malls on park land that should serve as a water catchment areas and deforestation of hills to the south of the city.



AP Photo/Ed Wray

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"The water is all gone, but the smell is awful," said Fifa, an 18-year-old woman as she removed bits of wood and other rubbish from her house in downtown Jakarta under bright, sunny skies. "But at least we can get back to normal now."

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