

Indonesia mud volcano still spewing sludge four years later

May 28 2010, by Adek Berry



Workers attempt to control the flow of mud from the Lapindo mud volcano in Porong, Sidoarjo district, on East Java on May 25. All attempts to plug the geyser have failed and new spouts are opening up, threatening to destroy more villages, homes and livelihoods in the East Java district of Sidoarjo.

Four years after it erupted from the well of a gas company linked to one of Indonesia's richest men, the mud volcano known as "Lusi" is still spewing its toxic sludge over Java's countryside.

All attempts to plug the geyser have failed and new spouts are opening up, threatening to destroy more villages, homes and livelihoods in the East Java district of Sidoarjo.

The mud lake is so huge -- seven square kilometres (almost three square miles) and 20 metres (66 feet) thick -- it is now visible from space, and

geologists say "Lusi" could continue gushing sludge for centuries.

But the victims who lost their homes after the mud began oozing from the bowels of the earth on May 29, 2006 are still waiting for the compensation they have been promised by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

"President Yudhoyono hasn't been able to do the best thing for the mud victims. The fact is that up to today we're still living in a disaster area," victim Gatot Wiyono said.

The mud -- a hot, bubbling, grey substance the consistency of wet concrete -- has already wiped out 12 villages, killed 13 people and displaced more than 42,000.

Independent foreign experts have concluded that haphazard gas exploration drilling by Lapindo Brantas, a company linked to powerful Golkar party chief Aburizal Bakrie, was almost certainly responsible.

Lapindo and the government blame an earthquake that struck days before about 280 kilometres away, a theory discredited by foreign scientists.

Even so, Yudhoyono ordered the company to pay about 400 million dollars for mud containment efforts and compensation to over 10,000 families. Analysts believe the total cleanup, if it is ever done, will cost many billions.

Victims are angry that Bakrie enjoys privileges as a key leader of Yudhoyono's coalition, and is seen as a possible presidential candidate in 2014.

"I just can't imagine what will happen if Aburizal Bakrie becomes

president. As a leader he's unfair, he failed to fulfil our rights," said mud victim Azis.

Many were disgusted when Yudhoyono acted as a witness at the lavish wedding of Bakrie's son in January.

"We were heartbroken when we saw the wedding reception for his son on television. The wedding must have been very expensive but we've been living in this shelter on an abandoned toll road for four years," said housewife Sita, whose home was buried beneath the mud.

Lapindo has blamed the global financial crisis for delays in disbursement of the compensation. It promised to complete the payments by the end of 2009 but many victims say they are still waiting for their full share.

Yudhoyono enraged victims further when, during a rare visit to the area in March, he suggested the disaster zone could be turned into a tourist attraction.

"With good layout and good concepts, we can turn this place into something useful for the community, whether as a geological tourist attraction, fishery or for other public activities," he said.

"If it's managed well, I have confidence this will be an attractive place and bring good to the local community."

Mud victim Mantep said the president did not seem to understand the people's pain.

"I don't want this area to be transformed into a tourist spot. That's not equal to our suffering," he said.

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