

New eruption at Indonesian volcano (Update)

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An Indonesian man watches as Mount Merapi erupts in Kepuharjo, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, Wednesday, Nov. 3, 2010. Indonesia's most dangerous volcano is once again sending searing gas clouds and burning rocks down its scorched flanks. (AP Photo/Gembong Nusantara)

(AP) -- Indonesia's deadly volcano erupted Wednesday with its biggest blast yet, shooting searing ash miles into the air as soldiers forced hasty new evacuations of people from villages and emergency shelters.

Women screamed and children cried as they were loaded into trucks while rocks and debris rained from the sky. Several abandoned homes were set ablaze and the carcasses of incinerated cattle littered the scorched slopes.

No new casualties were reported immediately after the booming explosion, which lasted more than an hour.

"This is an extraordinary eruption, triple from the first" on Oct. 26, said Surono, a state volcanologist.

More than 70,000 villagers have been evacuated from the 9,700-foot (3,000-meter) Mount Merapi's once-fertile slopes since it began erupting just over a week ago, killing 38 people and injuring dozens, most with severe burns.

There have been more than a dozen strong blasts since then - including one Wednesday morning - prompting some scientists to say pressure inside the crater was easing.

The danger zone was widened from 10 kilometers (six miles) from the glowing crater to 15 (9) because of the heightened threat. Soldiers and police blocked all roads leading up the mountain, shooing away television crews and reporters.

"I (didn't) think of anything else except to save my wife and son. We left my house and everything," said Tentrem Wahono, 50, who lives in Kaliurang village, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) from the peak.

He and his family fled on a motorbike, "racing with the explosive sounds as the searing ash chased us from behind."

The last eruption has raised Merapi's status to "crisis" condition, said Andi Arief, a special staff at the presidential office dealing with disaster and social assistance.

Merapi, one of the world's most active volcanoes, has erupted many times in the last century, killing more than 1,400 people.

Indonesia, a vast archipelago of 235 million people, is prone to earthquakes and volcanos because it sits along the Pacific "Ring of Fire,"

a horseshoe-shaped string of faults that lines the Pacific.

As a reminder of that, a 6.0-magnitude quake hit waters off the eastern province of Papua on Wednesday evening, rattling several villages but causing no known damage or casualties.

The volcano's initial blast on Oct. 26 occurred less than 24 hours after a towering tsunami slammed into remote islands on the western end of the country, sweeping entire villages to sea and killing at least 428 people.

In both cases, relief operations are expected to take weeks, possibly months.

More than 800 miles (1,300 kilometers) west of the volcano, helicopters and boats were delivering aid to tsunami survivors in the most distant Mentawai islands, which lies almost directly over the fault that spawned the 2004 Indian Ocean monster quake and wave.

There has been talk in recent days about relocating villagers away from vulnerable coastlines.

"I'm all for it," said Regen, who lives on Pagai Utara island and goes by one name. "We're all terrified now, especially at night, and wouldn't mind moving further inland."

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