

CIVIL ALLIANCES FOR LAPINDO VICTIMS



Sidoarjo, August 30, 2007

Re: Open letter about unprecedented humanitarian, socio, economic and environmental tragedy in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia

Dear Sir/madam,

Allow us to draw your attention to what happened, happening (and likely still continuing for years to come) in once a peaceful and simple sub-urban in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia, which turns into one catastrophic sites, due to an unprecedented industrial disaster ever recorded in the history of mankind.

On the quite dawn of May 29 2006, a flow of hot mud with gas and smoke started gushing from the ground in productive paddy fields adjacent to densely populated village, in Sidoarjo. While less than 200m away, a gas exploration is underway in a site called the Banjar Panji I well as part of the Brantas Production Sharing Contract area, owned by Lapindo Brantas Inc. (jointly owned by EMP-Bakrie Group 50%, Medco Energy 32 % and Santos Co. Australia 18 %). This incident learnt by inhabitant of the villages when they were on their way to work on their paddy fields first thing in the morning. Without any chance to comprehend what had been happening (none of the people in the vicinity interviewed aware that the industrial activity nearby them is a drilling process), the mud start to flow toward the houses and quickly covered the paddy fields.

And without any preparation or warning whatsoever, people panicky started to pack-up their belongings, gathered their family member and seek for refuge, from the incoming flow contain mix of hot mud and water and H₂S, which mercilessly drown anything stands in its way. This state of confusion further worsened by other sudden burst of flow located in a kitchen, in one of the house in the village, 300 meter from the first flow. With the initial rate of 5.000 m³ per day, the flow that turns out to be a mud volcano phenomenon, quickly increases to 100.000 m³ in days. As today, the expert estimated that the spilling is up to 150,000 m³ of hot mud on the surrounding area daily.

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Fast forward, if one visits the location today, they will witness one of the most horrified scenery imaginable in the face of the planet. Once beautiful scenery of villages surrounded by green paddy fields constructed harmoniously in typical sub-urban environment, had been replaced by a 600 ha above the ground basin (with the height of dirt dykes surround it varied between 10 meter in the outer part, and 24 meter in ring dykes surrounding the crater), that contain of thick mud and water. Other than hot mud, from the crater also constantly spew various gases, with the most dominant part is H₂S that freely expose, and can be smell by, population in the surrounding area as far 10 km away. Today, if we stand in the brink of the centre ring dykes, there is an eerie feeling of being in a place resemble those in a set of futuristic or alien movie, while we acknowledge what (or used to) lies beneath those surrounding mud, that spread as far as eyes can see.

Inside the basin are history, livelihood, memories and homes of almost 40.000 peoples (our figures count as many 4.257 children and 35.450 adult, of which 19.076 women and 16.374 men) who used to reside in 11 villages and 13.000 houses, that had drowned (buried to be exact, because the mud are solidified through times), together with every public, health, educational and religious facilities serving it. The damage to the environment yet to be calculated, but we assured you, it is huge. It is getting worse as there are also buried gas and electricity lines and water pipelines, (serving the Java Bali network, two of Indonesian most inhabited island that housed about 70 percent of this 220 million population country), which constantly disrupt (the worst being huge explosion of gas line killed 8 people). There lies also 2km part of national highway, which made the transport network can't function normally, which cause the worst traffic jam, match only in those of mega-cities (expect 1 hour delay if we're lucky, while the record is around the clock).

As for the people, being forced to abandon their houses, neighborhood and livelihood, those 40.000 people then seek refuge in any comfortable place available (such as their relative or distant family houses, village halls, and schools). But most of them seek shelters in the nearby newly built traditional market, of course with no proper facilities to accommodate thousand of people, until today. So they've been forced to move from their simple but comfortable life to a place with very minimum health, sanitation and other facilities, to dwell in a 3x4 stall per family; while others are in the hall, where they have to raise their family,

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watch their children play and doing the intimacy with their spouse separated only by one sheet of fabric from their neighbors.

It's too good to be true in this so called Flat World or Globalization or Broadband Internet era or whatever you'd like to call it, but this man-made catastrophic event, which is (at some point) worst than anything ever recorded in the history (Bhopal accident, Exxon Valdez, Chernobyl, etc) has been missed from the majority of international attention. No global solidarity arose, no call for international relief and very minimum media coverage given (most are only fingers count Jakarta based International media). No International NGOs come and conduct continuous program to relieve or advocate the victim. Even a well-reputable environmental NGOs such Greenpeace who came and wrote about the magnitude of this (they called it industrial) disaster, and acknowledged the need to relieve and advocate it, didn't commission any follow up plan.

Among so many aid organizations, (as we aware of) only WHO and UNEP showed up and did some research. Even though they wrote some recommendations, but there is very limited follow up and not at all continuing. The other notable International initiatives being conducted regarding this disaster came from Friend of the International which urges International Banks finance the operation to push the shared-holders companies of Lapindo Brantas pay the cost, because they tend to dodge their responsibilities. While from academic communities, several did show up, though limited only to those with geological background and interesting only in the cause of the mud volcano phenomena. Other than that, the only notable foreign academic research, which is followed-up with significant activities, came from Flinders University, located in Adelaide, (the city which is happened to be host of Santos Co headquarter) South Australia.

While we don't pretence to justify or judge, why and how there is lack of media coverage and/or relieve initiatives, we just want to emphasize the need to rectify these with respect to those facts. If you think those situation is bad, here is you will find it more shocking. The mud volcano is still alive and tends to getting more unpredictable each time. An average of 100.000-150.000 m³ (can fill out a 40 – 60 olympic-size swimming pool) mud is still gushing every day, while every attempt had been made, failed to stop the flow. Furthermore, no

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expert or technology and science available, is able to calculate or predict how long the flow will last. The moderate estimation said years, while some experts claim that the only fair assumptions would be to anticipate this as a permanent situation, in other words it will be there forever.

There is also a potential of massive health problem for the population of Sidoarjo, as the gasses produced by this disaster is freely exposed to hundreds of thousands of people living in the 10 km distance from the location. While most study being done about the gasses only focus on the composition of those gasses (mostly H₂S), there is no focus on the potential of danger brought by prolonged exposure to such gasses. The surface treatment is also not less worrisome, since the dam (actually it's dirt dykes, since it's built from dirt) built to contain the mud is constantly overflowing and overtopping, while leakage and breakage of the dam almost a constant situation. Meanwhile, thousands (maybe even hundreds of thousands) of people still living in the vicinity of the dam, and directly exposed to the dam collapse threat, around the clock. Yet, no permanent plan had been laid, let alone implemented, to manage the mud. You see, while for other disasters the situation tends to get better when time goes by, this disaster is at its opposite. The threat is increasing day by day.

The other unavoidable but gloomy future impact of this mud volcano is the phenomenon of land subsidence around the center of the source that would create a crater-like landscape. Again, there's no technology able to predict when, how far possible affected area, and how bad the subsidence would happen. While experts still are indecisive about the distance (varied between 2 to 10 kilometers) of the possible affected area, hundreds of thousands of people still living nearby (with the closest housing area still inhabited is only 500 meter distance from the center). And for your information, this area is a sub-urban of Surabaya, second largest city in Indonesia (pop 5 mil), and only 13 km away. We dare not to imagine what would happen if the land subsidence strikes in the middle of the night, while people still fall asleep, when most of the houses are not designed as a shock-free construction.

What have been done to anticipate this foreseeable and undisputable potential catastrophic scenario? I'm sorry to let you down, but your guess is right, there is none! No evacuation plan laid and no early warning system designed.

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To conclude this letter, we would like to humbly ask for your attention to what happened and happening here in Sidoarjo, East Java, Indonesia. Regardless what the cause, who's wrong and who should responsible for this, the fact is laid bare, that a disaster had been happened, is happening and the worst is likely still about to happen. Yet, after 15 month from the beginning of this horrified event, the manner in which this problem is dealt is far from satisfactorily. We ask you to find out about this unprecedented modern humanitarian, social, economic and environmental man-made tragedy, from every possible source available. If applicable, we invite you to come here and witness it by your own eyes. Then, when you have learned about what happened, we'd like to extent our hand in the effort to advocate the right of the victims, relieve their suffering, restore the damage, take precautionary step for the future threat and urge whoever responsible for this disaster to do their obligation.

Finally, thank you for your attention, and please feel free to contact us for any inquiry regarding this disaster. One last favor, please forward this letter to as many people as possible, especially organizations or individual who have concerns, expertise and resources to relieve the victim, restore the damage and prevent the future impact of this unnatural disaster.

Kind regards,

Spokesperson of the Alliances

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(currently in bahasa Indonesia, but we're plan to provide English version soon)

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Some websites provide good information and initiatives about this disaster:

<http://mudflow-sidoarjo.110mb.com/index.htm> (recently updated and provide many other link to sites contain information about the disaster)

<http://hotmudflow.wordpress.com/> (daily updated, in Bahasa Indonesia, mostly domestic news media)

<http://www.crisp.nus.edu.sg/coverages/mudflow/index.html> (satellite photograph of disaster area, before and after the accident, last update 13 July 2007)

<http://www.foei.org/en/media/archive/2007/banks-finance-mud-volcano/?searchterm=lapindo> (Initiatives from FoEI to urge Bank finances Lapindo Brantas to ensure that they pressure Lapindo Brantas to pay for the damage)

<http://www.greenpeace.org/seasia/en/photosvideos/slideshows/the-sidoarjo-mud-flow> (analysis about the disaster written 26 September 2006, link to photo slide)

http://searo.who.int/en/Section1257/Section2263/Section2341/Section2376/Section2384_13095.htm (last update at 19 February 2007, and with several inaccurate data, i.e. no refugee, place several medical unit standby, etc)

Several News coverage of this disaster can be found at googlenews:

<http://news.google.com/archivesearch?q=mudflow+sidoarjo&num=20&ned=us>

About Civil Alliances for Lapindo Victims:

We are alliances of 37 NGOs, institutions, academics, individual and most importantly, victim groups, who fight for the right of the victims and the restoration of social, economic, cultural and environmental loss (likely) due to industrial disaster caused by Lapindo Brantas Inc, in Sidoarjo, East Java Indonesia. We're building, and therefore welcome the support and joint effort by other institutions NGOs, institutions, academics and individual who would like to fight for the same causes.