

IN BRIEF: POLITICAL

Float on

The late January deluge that swamped Jakarta marked the beginning of the high season for the city's flood mitigation specialists. While government officials moved forward with a disaster response program to ease the fallout, experts say it is the same reactionary position taken every time flooding occurs here. Hydrologist Sutopo Nugroho, fresh from an emergency flood meeting at *Bappenas* on February 9, told the *Report*, "Every time there is a flood, there is a lot of activity. But the problem is that in between floods people forget."

Hydrologists like Sutopo and geologists, urban planners and engineers comprise the small band of flood experts in Jakarta. When their opinions have been sought in recent years concerning the causes and possible solutions to the floods, they rattle off the same set of talking points time after time. They say that Jakarta's geography makes it vulnerable for flooding, sitting near sea level and surrounded by higher ground. Another root cause is the inadequate capacity of its river system to channel large amounts of water due to silt deposits and heaps of garbage that help spill the water over the flood banks. Furthermore, housing developments and roads now cover much of the green space that previously absorbed heavy rainfalls in Jakarta, Bogor and Puncak. Finally, they say, much of the city's drainage system was constructed 100 years ago and needs overhauled to keep pace with Jakarta's continued expansion (See Box One).

Box One: A Recipe for Disaster**Land use in Jakarta (percentage of cover)**

Housing	66
Industry	5
Offices	12
Warehouses	2
Parks (including reservoirs and marshland)	15

Land use around the Ciliwung river outside Jakarta (percentage of cover)

	1990	1999
Forest	21	19
Plantation	25	21
Dry fields	9	23
Wet rice fields	39	11
Residential	6	26

Drainage

Percentage of Jakarta's land area covered by drainage	2.9
Percentage needed to avoid flooding	8

Sources: BPPT, Sutopo Nugroho (2007) *Banjir Jakarta*, *Jakarta Post* (7.2.07), *Media Indonesia* (10.2.07).

While preventive solutions have been identified that could help limit future flooding in Jakarta, the variety of disciplines that these specialists come from point to what a multi-dimensional problem the floods present. Beyond technical complexities, overlapping responsibilities among the central, provincial and district governments adds to the confusion. But perhaps the most significant flood issue facing Jakarta has been the timing of them—seemingly synchronised with the change in government every five years. In effect, it means an existing administration can blame its predecessor, and by the next big flood today's

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administration could perhaps be out of office, too. Such is democratic politics.

No silver bullet exists to fix the flooding, but both local and central government officials have made extremely heavy weather of what seems to be a solvable problem. Following the last major Jakarta flood in 2002, government assurances that the problem was being tackled were splashed across headlines. The Cabinet of then President Megawati vowed to allocate Rp 1.5 to Rp 1.7 trillion every year to implement a newly revised flood masterplan that had made the rounds of successive administrations since 1997. Sutopo, however, estimates that only Rp 300 billion was actually spent each year.

As the floods found themselves briefly a top the political agenda in 2002, the head of Jakarta's City Development Planning Body, Ritola Tasmaya, told the public that the construction of a new flood canal would be finished in 2007. Jakarta Governor Sutiyoso went on record at the time promising that land would be cleared by the end of 2002. But by January 2007 only 7.7 km of the proposed 23.7 km canal has been built, and there is still a long way to go in freeing up the remaining lands. In addition to the canal, dams were to be constructed, squatters living on river banks were to be offered low-cost housing, and drainage channels were to be upgraded.

"There was some effort at flood control after 2002," says Sutopo. "But it was really just tinkering at the edges, nothing serious was done."

Governor Sutiyoso and other officials maintain that the title holders to the land needed for the canal are obstructing the process due to some refusals to sell the land. But government efforts to obtain the land have been far from smooth. Responsibility has been kicked back and forth between Governor Sutiyoso and the Governor of East Jakarta. Both have issued regulations stating different compensation levels for landowners. Locals have complained that the government's buyout program has not been properly explained and that some officials have exploited the bureaucratic confusion and charged illegal levies. Reports of intimidation by middle-men have also surfaced.

Moreover, efforts to avoid responsibility for the failure to prevent the floods have turned into something of a political art. This time around Governor Sutiyoso blamed neighbouring local governments for issuing too many building permits, squatters for clogging up Jakarta's waterways, and the central government for not releasing promised funds. "It is important for residents to understand not to look for a scapegoat," the news portal Detik.com quoted him as saying.

President Yudhoyono skilfully distanced himself from the floods in a spat he had with the Jakarta governor on February 4 over the opening of a flood gate that would have relieved some parts of Jakarta while also flooding the Presidential Palace. Quashing rumours that he had asked for the flood gates to remain closed, President Yudhoyono re-affirmed that the decision on whether to open the gates was in Governor Sutiyoso's hands. Some commentators saw this as a clear signal from the president that the responsibility for flood control lay firmly with the governor.

Meanwhile, amid all of this political posturing, hundreds of thousands of

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people who started with next to nothing lost everything. After living under a bypass for several days, the *Report* met Ibu Sarni, a mother of two, as she returned to her ruined home in Tanjung Barat. “I only managed to grab a pair of school shoes for my daughter, but I couldn’t save anything else,” she said while sobbing, “not even some cloth.” Some of her neighbours were even worse off after the floods destroyed their homes. “We do not have a house and we do not know where else to go,” one said.

While insurance claims of some US\$400 million are expected to be paid out, the head of the Indonesian Association for General Insurance, Frans Y Sahusilawane, said that businesses hold the vast majority of policies. For those without insurance, Governor Sutiyo promised that each sub-district would receive Rp 1 billion for rebuilding and the minister for social affairs, Bachtiar Chamsyah, pledged Rp 10 million from the central government’s coffers for each household.

But if past aid efforts are anything to go by, the distribution of the funds is likely to be troublesome. In 2002, many residents missed out entirely while others reportedly only saw a fraction of the amount they had signed for in official documents. Reports have already surfaced that the same kind of opportunism is again occurring. One volunteer aid worker in Jakarta’s Sunter area told the *Report* that each resident had been pressured into paying soldiers assigned to clean the area between Rp 700,000 and Rp 1 million a day to take away garbage that could potentially lead to public health problems.

There are solutions on the table that can start the process of preventing future floods but the difficulties in implementing them should not be underestimated. For public works to proceed, low-cost housing has to be constructed for those without alternatives. Land must be bought from private owners using government regulations and practices that remain largely untested in the country’s democratic era; under Soeharto lands such as these were simply appropriated by force. Coordination between different levels of government and their jurisdictions must also be worked out within the country’s still evolving decentralised system. On top of it all, funds must be appropriated from an already overburdened budget.

With the Jakarta gubernatorial election nearing, it is unlikely that the city government will be able to take responsibility for such tasks in the near future as the new governor settles in. But it is *now* that a concerted effort needs to get under way if the floods are to be stopped. This leaves the central government with the potential to play a leading role in fully coordinating flood prevention efforts.

For now, flood experts feel that President Yudhoyono is unnecessarily accelerating three new laws at the DPR to deal with the floods. They claim the laws are fine as they stand. Rather than taking such vacuous measures, the president would be well advised to take on coordination for the flood efforts as a personal responsibility. A great legacy of his tenure could be that he was the one president who was able to put an end to the floods that have plagued the capital for years. At the same time, if the executive branch did take control it could serve as a good opportunity to test the fabled can-do attitude of the country’s second in command, Vice President Kalla.