

Distribution for Indonesia Volcano Survivors

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation

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In the shadow of the deadly Merapi volcano in Indonesia, volunteers have been distributing relief goods, providing comfort to those who have lost their loved ones and helping the evacuees as best they can.

Mount Merapi is located in central Java, 28 kilometers north of Yogyakarta city and the most active volcano in Indonesia; it has erupted regularly since 1548. Thousands live on the slopes of the volcano, with some villages as high as 1,700 meters above sea level. On October 25, the government raised the alert for Merapi – which means ‘mountain of fire’ in Javanese – and warned villagers living in threatened areas to move to safer ground. That afternoon, lava erupted from the southern and southeastern slopes of the mountain. Since then, the volcano has erupted frequently, covering the area in thick volcanic ash and killing more than 130 people, including members of rescue teams sent to help the residents.

In response to this disaster, Tzu Chi volunteers from Jakarta and Yogyakarta had provided goods, money and comfort to some of the thousands of displaced people. They planned distributions in the village of Umbulharjo, Glagahrejo and Kepuharjo on November 3. They prepared two kinds of goods. One was a hygiene pack with a sarong, towel, toothbrush and toothpaste, soap and a face mask; the other pack was for infants, which had a pillow, blanket and two items of clothing.



In Umbulharjo village, just as the volunteers were distributing the goods, the rain started to pour heavily. Five minutes after the rain stopped, they heard a fearful noise. Terrified residents rushed into the streets and fled. Police and volunteers assisted the rescue workers evacuating the residents. The government ordered an enlargement of the evacuation area from 10 to 15 kilometers from the mountain. “Before the warning siren, the residents were not afraid and queued up to receive the goods,” said volunteer Susanto Widjaja. “Once it had sounded, they immediately ran for their lives.” The vehicle carrying the Tzu Chi goods was among the last to leave the area, together with the police and rescue vans. At the evacuation centre, volunteers found two women who were having difficulty breathing, because they had inhaled too much volcanic ash. Since the medical equipment there was inadequate, they immediately took the two to the nearest public health centre for treatment.

After the siren had ceased and the situation had returned to normal, the volunteers went back to the village to retrieve the relief goods they had left behind. They discovered that the villagers came back for the goods. “We were very shaken,” said Xie Xuizhu, a volunteer from Taiwan. “It shows that what we brought was desperately needed.” At the evacuation centre, elderly women wept as they profusely thanked the volunteers. “Thank you gentlemen and ladies for being so

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concerned for us,” they said. “In the face of such a giant volcano, you have come to our centre to help us.”

One of the tasks of the volunteers is to comfort those who have lost their loved ones. One collective funeral, for 30 people, was held in the village of Kinahrejo, once picturesque and fertile but now covered in thick, volcanic ash. “It is five kilometers away from the peak of Mount Merapi,” said Mika Wulan, a reporter with Indonesian Daai Television. “You can see that everything here is charred. Even the trees are toasted to a chocolate colour. This shows how hot the volcanic lava was.” He said that the cemetery was a collaborative effort by the military, police, residents and volunteers.



“I am very sad,” said Narti, a relative of two of those killed. “I did not think that my uncle and aunt would be gone so soon.” The volunteers did their best to console them and gave them a sum of money, to help them find the courage to rebuild their lives. “We are saddened by such a devastating disaster,” said Joe Riadi. “Though the catastrophe was inevitable, hopefully there will not be another disaster of such severity.”

The Great Love station has launched a campaign to raise money for the victims, together with the foundation and the Sinar Mas group. More than 200 people turned out to collect money.

The time passes slowly for the thousands waiting in evacuation centers. They are eager to return home but have been ordered not to, because of the threat of another eruption. The children especially find the idleness hard to bear. To ease the boredom, a library arrived from the nearby city of Yogyakarta. “We have come to set up a mobile library at the temporary shelters,” said Tri Hardjito, one of the library staff. “It was warmly welcomed. Many people come to read books now.” It also provides videos; the children are delighted at this new entertainment.