

Lahar destroys farmlands

Thousands were forced to flee their homes as lahar from the slopes of Mount Merapi inundated hundreds of houses and destroyed hundreds of hectares of agriculture fields in Magelang, Central Java, and Sleman, Yogyakarta, on Monday evening.

Heavy downpours since the afternoon in the regions sent thick layers of volcanic debris down the slope of Merapi, carrying logs and volcanic rocks of up to 2 meters in diameter, destroying everything they hit along the way.

In Cangkringan district, Sleman, lahar destroyed at least two bridges and four houses. Thousands from a number of villages along the banks of Opak River were forced to flee over fears the flood would inundate their houses.

“Heavy downpours always worry us. We always flee home when it happens,” said Murni of Panggung village, Argomulyo subdistrict, Cangkringan.

Cangkringan district head Samsul Bakri said his administration had routinely supervised the people, communicating the importance of staying alert to nature. “They are capable of voluntarily evacuating themselves in times of danger,” he said.

The administration, he added, had also been normalizing the stream along the river and deployed heavy equipment at the locations in case they were needed.

“We call on the people to stay alert to the threat of lahar especially those living along the banks of Opak and Gendol rivers,” Syamsul said. The flood Monday evening also covered the Cangkringan Police filling it with sand up to 2 meters deep, destroying most police documents.

“It’s impossible for us to use the office. We are looking for a place to relocate,” Sleman Police chief Irwan Ramaini said Tuesday. He added that his personnel temporarily shared a room at the district administration office while waiting for a more permanent office to work from. He also said they were ready to be deployed.

The lahar paralyzed the Magelang-Yogyakarta route in Muntilan, Central Java, as volcanic debris flowing through Putih River overflowed on to the road for some 500 meters, covered it with the materials up to more than 2 meters deep. Two excavators were deployed to help normalize the highway. However, due to the thick layers of volcanic materials, they had not yet been able to completely clear them from the road as of Tuesday afternoon.

Vehicles from Semarang, Central Java, heading to Yogyakarta and vice versa were redirected to travel through Purworejo or Boyolali in Central Java.

“Due to lahar we have to pass through Boyolali,” a conductor of a bus serving the Lebak Bulus (Jakarta)–Yogyakarta–Klaten route announced. “We should have arrived in Yogyakarta by 3 p.m. but will only arrive at 5 p.m.,” Agus, a passenger, said. In Magelang, lahar hit three villages along the banks of Putih River, inundating hundreds of houses.

Lahar will continue to threaten areas along the banks of the 12 rivers originating at Merapi as those rivers are still filled with thick layers of volcanic materials of up to 17 kilometers down their streams, ready to travel as heavy rain pours over the region.