

5 dead in Nias landslides, cars and homes buried

The Nias Search and Rescue Agency (SAR) on Thursday reported that the death toll from four separate but simultaneous landslides in Baruje village, South Nias regency, North Sumatra, had reached five people, four of whom were junior high school students.

SAR coordinator Benteng Telaumbanua said the five victims had been evacuated and handed over to their families.

"The SAR team arrived at the disaster scene this afternoon and was able to evacuate the bodies of the five victims," Benteng told The Jakarta Post on Thursday afternoon.

Benteng said that the discovery of the five victims also dismissed rumors that seven people had died in the disaster.

Benteng said that reports that 30 other residents had been buried in the landslide were false.

"There are no more victims buried in the landslide — all of them have been evacuated," he said, adding that he had sent the SAR team home.

South Nias Disaster Mitigation Agency (BPBD) head Arototona Mendeva said that there had been four landslides in Baruje village, which together had destroyed 37 homes and scores of vehicles.

Arototona said that his office did not yet know the number of landslide victims in the village, which was home to 112 families. However, based on statements from residents, seven people were killed and 30 others remained missing.

"Data on the number of victims remains confusing. We will certainly check it in the field after the SAR team arrives at the location," Arototona said when reached by the Post by phone from Medan on Thursday.

He added that the landslide survivors, who had taken refuge at a nearby church, did not have enough food or supplies, and many were in shock.

Benteng said that the joint SAR team had not arrived at the disaster location due to a damaged bridge and extreme weather.

The SAR team had to wade and swim across the Susua River to reach the location.

"The SAR team just crossed the river at 11:30 a.m., and will proceed on foot the rest of the way to the location, which is very far up a mountain," Benteng said.

Considering the rough terrain, Benteng said, he could not be sure when evacuation efforts would begin. He said he hoped that the weather would improve in the next few days in Nias so that the SAR team could quickly evacuate the victims.