

Don't sell us down the river, 'Pak' Jokowi



Amphibious vehicle: A car is trapped during the recent flood in Hotel Indonesia traffic circle, Central Jakarta. *JP/Ricky Yudhistira*

Jan. 20: Was it the BBC World News or a Ben Affleck Hollywood disaster movie I watched at 6 a.m. this morning?

Among the highlights, the UK was at a standstill as arctic conditions closed roads, airports, businesses and schools. Sydney was suffering from massive bush fires and on Friday recorded 45.6 degrees Celcius, its highest ever temperature. Meanwhile as a deadly drought grips large swathes of Africa, many places, including here, are suffering from torrential rain and atrocious floods.

Looking back over 2012 at the incredible number of climate-related disasters, it seems that the scenarios and warnings predicted by environmental scientists over the last few years and generally ignored by world governments is playing out and we, the man on the street, are the main protagonists.

With parts of Jakarta having been under several meters of water, many roads impassable, lives lost and commerce grinding to a halt, it may seem an untimely or even opportunistic moment to bring up the topic of environmental damage. I believe, however, the contrary to be true, because if we cannot understand and act after witnessing such widespread devastation then quite frankly we never will.

Jakarta's problems, of course, are not new or even entirely due to changes to the climate. Indeed these floods have not been the result of a huge storm or tidal surge but more related directly to our own failings and greed. For as long as I can recall, the general level of maintenance of drains and wider facilities, such as dikes and defenses, has been dire in the city and beyond.

If you combine this with the average Jakartan's lust for direct refuse disposal, the sheer volume produced and general laissez-faire attitude to cleanliness, we should be unsurprised at what we see, and perhaps few are. The city has been placed under a state of emergency until at least Jan. 27 as parts of the capital are simply at a waterlogged standstill, people have already died, tens of thousands been displaced and deadly disease will surely follow.

What is most worrying about this flood for me is that it is not as a result of a super storm, as we saw recently in New York, but is simply the annual rains being heavier than usual and the lack of clear planning and action. But that is, in fact, making excuses or even ignoring the real reasons why floods in Jakarta have become such a political tool.

I have already touched upon the disgusting refuse situation, dike and drain maintenance and their ability to deal with prolonged rains. However there are two other major contributing factors that, in the main, seem to get conveniently ignored or glossed over: The seemingly uncontrolled urban spread and the destruction of the forests and farming lands in Jakarta's water catchment area.

The politicization and corruption surrounding mass building projects, such as shopping malls, sports facilities and even residential projects is well documented. This is not the place for that debate, instead,

The politicization and corruption surrounding mass building projects, such as shopping malls, sports facilities and even residential projects is well documented. This is not the place for that debate, instead, however, I would like to point out the impact of such apparently unregulated spread on the city's ability to cope with the annual deluge.

Open land, forest, paddy and even wasteland are diminishing commodities in and around Jakarta, as the need to house and provide facilities for a burgeoning population grows by the year. This is to be expected and in many respects is no bad thing when viewed from a purely economic stance. However, as we see right now, when the environmental planning fails the economic cost can be enormous negating much of the benefit in both the short- and medium-term.

Incessant building, in addition to decreasing local food-producing capacity, increases transport pressure adding to ever worsening traffic jams, more pollution and increased environmental pressure. The mass urban spread also weakens, and in some places has already destroyed, one of our most valuable and natural defenses against floods. Trees, plants and fields soak up and regulate water flow, they are like a sponge. Mass building projects, on the other hand, concentrate the volume and velocity of rainwater, and where the drains are inadequate, blocked or full, the water overflows, often with huge destructive energy.

Directly related to the city's ability to deal with the rains is the speed and volume at which it arrives from the south, which forms the majority of the water catchment area. Just before Christmas, I drove to Puncak for the first time in about five years and was left speechless by the scale of open land loss, including massive hillside deforestation that, along with an incredible amount of construction, has in effect partially destroyed Jakarta's southern flood safety net.

The people who have issued building permits on such a scale are, in my view, guilty of not just contributing to Jakarta's flood woes; they have a responsibility for every death that has occurred and every dollar lost. On a local note, the soil erosion, already clearly visible throughout the drive, will take its toll on the area's fertility and in only a short time severely disrupt the local agriculture-based economy. The nutrients are washed down the rivers and the result is the ongoing over-enrichment of inland and coastal waters. Nutrient enrichment along with pollution has the real potential to create a massive dead area; for anyone who has used the ports that may not be a surprise.

Whenever floods are reported throughout Indonesia one element that often fails to get the media coverage it deserves is the cost in human lives. Each major flood claims victims, often the most vulnerable in our society, including many post-flood deaths via illness such as dengue fever and water-borne pathogen-induced diarrhea. One can guess that many of the people who die, sadly, may not even become a government statistic.

With an ever increasing tidal and tropical storm threat brought about by climate change, uncontrolled urban expansion and the destruction of the water catchment area, the new governor is getting a baptism of fire; but he faces an ongoing and far more severe challenge, one his predecessors largely ignored, if Jakarta is to flourish. How he deals with this may well shape not only his own political future but the shape of the capital for generations to come.

There has been a lot to applaud about his first few months in office, and I truly hope that in years to come we will look back on this as the moment he seized the moment and hammered in the nails of change for the good of all the residents of Jakarta.

For the sake of the capital and its people, please don't sell us short Pak Jokowi.