We must prove our resilience in the face of disaster

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The disasters just keep coming and coming. Dozens of people died and hundreds more were injured last week when a powerful earthquake hit West Java. This seismic activity was even shook the nation’s capital. These sorts of terrifying tremors undeniably haunt the life of people in Indonesia, from Sabang to Merauke.

The movement of the tectonic plates along the Ring of Fire, which engulfs the country, puts Indonesia in a precarious position. Unpredictable seismic activity, together with the risk of tsunami, cause great uncertainty. But this is not the end of the story.

This year, there is also concern about the possibility of a prolonged dry season and perhaps even a drought because of the El Nino phenomenon and, all the while we still face the threat of the spread of the swine and bird flu.

It is not only natural disasters. The increasing negligence and unawareness of environmental problems has led to significant ecological disasters. The reoccurrences of major floods indicate the dismal attempts at watershed management and a failure to protect forest ecosystems. Slash and burn agriculture continues to be practiced as a cheap and easy way to clear land.

Consequently, land and forest fires have become a chronic problem for this nation. The collapse of the Situ Gintung dam in Tangerang, West Java, several months ago gave solemn proof of our environmental negligence.

The majority of victims in these disasters are ordinary people. When the rubble is cleared, natural disasters leave people living under the poverty line, everything they had gone.

These disasters pose a great challenge for this nation, especially its leaders. In this time of unpredictable crisis, leaders are not only pushed to do right thing, but also express sympathy. Leadership is tested when crisis hits, and what our elected officials do under pressure reveals their true character.

In his 2003 book Crisis Leadership, Gene Klann says there are three essential foundations for effective leadership under crisis: good communication, a clear vision for problem solving and genuine sympathy.

When leaders visit the site of a disaster their ability to communicate is tested. They must show victims that they are important. But this communication must be followed up with the application of concrete solutions.

However, emergency response efforts are not enough; anticipatory steps must be taken to
prevent the unnecessary loss of life. Disaster management and preparedness measures must be taken seriously.

But it is sad to hear that our citizens still act irresponsibly. The theft of tsunami early detection instruments is a sad example of negligence and irresponsibility.

We must contemplate our awareness as a nation. We need to build a more resilient nation and disasters can provide momentum for the development of this resilience.

We as a nation could learn from the Acehnese. They had to deal with military offensives for decades and there suffering only ended with great tragedy when the catastrophic 2004 tsunami killed thousands of people in the region.

However, the society’s resilience was able to stem collective stress. They looked forward and rebuilt their land. This is what we should do as a nation. In short, if we would like to overcome our problems and become a great country, we have to be a strong nation with resilient citizens.

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