Disasters and a mismanaged nation

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In a recent seminar at an Australian university, an Australian biologist gave a speech about his recent expedition to Kalimantan in search of a rare species of carnivorous plant.

However what struck me about his presentation was not botanic marvels, but the disastrous state of Indonesian regulation. The biologist recounted a story from his trip about the boat he took upstream.

Passengers were required to disembark and hike up hill each time the boat encountered a shallow and/or rocky stream.

The boat owner told him hundreds of people died every year in the stream as no safety gear was kept on the boat. The Australian scientist was bewildered that nothing was being done about this (seemingly fixable) continual loss of life.

Such stories are common in Indonesia. Not even public transport uses proper passenger safety standards. For the sake of money, passengers are cramped in well above capacity, and this is never seen as a problem. Look at our land, sea and air transportations.

Indonesian lives are undervalued. The recent Situ Gintung dam tragedy is testament to this. No one has been willing to admit responsibility. If this tragedy occurred in Japan, it would be swiftly followed by the resignations of responsible authorities.

The series of disasters in this country emphasize the mismanagement of the nation. The government does not prioritize fostering better lives for its citizens. The lack of management of this large country has been occurring in every sector and turned the country into a juggernaut: an unstoppable force that crushes everything in its way.

In terms of disaster, we face the possibility of earthquakes and tsunamis occurring at any time. The problem is not the disaster, but the lack of disaster management that could equip people to save lives.

We also suffer from human-induced disasters. Forest mismanagement and watersheds mean floods occur regularly. The lack of urban planning has resulted in tragedies like the collapse of the dam in Situ Gintung. We are now living in a red zone of disaster.

However, the government is not exclusively responsible. People also contribute to Indonesia’s problems. Regulations are not followed, forests are logged illegally and representative officials always look for ways to make money rather than doing their jobs properly. Perhaps we are too stubborn to follow the laws.

In the case of Situ Gintung, the government has to take responsibility for the disaster. The government failed to repair the dam. However, citizens must also act responsibly.
It might not only be the government who sees the lives of its citizens as cheap; when we act and feel the same way. Therefore, disaster management must begin with learning to respect and value Indonesian lives.

Mitigation and prevention should be the major focus of this new paradigm. Of course this is easier said than done. The main challenge is to shift the basic structure of this mentality.

In some ways, Indonesians describe themselves as people who live in the present and prefer to take shortcuts rather than think about the future. No wonder this country lacks long term grand plans. The enactment of the Disaster Management Law no. 24/2007, for example, was not so much influenced by the vision of disaster mitigation as it was a quick-fix response to the tsunami.

The accumulation of state negligence, unawareness and false paradigms has heightened these complex national problems.

However, it is not too late to wake up. We have to initiate actions to solve these problems. Government officials must start playing more substantial roles while citizens begin acting more responsibly.

We can start with this simple question: what kind of country do we want our children to inherit?

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