The need for disaster early warning systems

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The bushfire in the Australian state of Victoria have not stopped yet. The tragedy has so far claimed about 180 lives and destroyed many properties. The number is expected to increase as the authorities access more homes. This is the worst tragedy in Australian bushfire history. The *Ash Wednesday* bushfires of 1983, previously the worst bushfires, caused no more than one hundred deaths.

Due to its natural characteristics, Australia is really *the land of fire*. Bushfires occur frequently. Therefore, this country has applied advanced fire management techniques. But the fire is not that bad at all. It is used in many parts of Australia as a management tool.

National park authorities deliberately burn some areas of forest to manage species and decrease the risk of fire by reducing the amount of natural litter.

However, the current bushfires are terrible. The very dry air and high temperature for last couple months in the south has provided perfect conditions for the fires to ignite. Although, there have been speculations about the source of the ignition, whether it was by criminals or lightning, the current climatic conditions have allowed the fire to spread rapidly.

Sadly, while it is burning in the south, northern Queensland is experiencing high rainfalls due to the development tropical cyclones. The category 1 Tropical Cyclone Ellie left northern Queenslanders water-logged for more than two weeks. The city of Ingham, as a result, drowned in floodwaters.

This was one of the worst floods in the last decades in the region. Referring to these contradictory conditions between the north and the south, the local paper in Townsville, the regional center of north Queensland joked that, "water doesn't flow in this continent".

The nature of the current disaster shows us that the risk of natural disasters is not likely to decline in the future. Some analysts pointed out that the alteration of climate linked to global warming might be part of the cause. Australia is predicted to be at risk of more tragedies like the Victorian bushfires.

A report by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Australia's premier science research institution, quoted by the United Firefighters Union of Australia, shows that under a bad global warming scenario, "catastrophic events are predicted to occur every year in Mildura and firefighters have been warned to expect up to a 230 percent increase in extreme danger fire days in Bendigo alone." Both places are in Victoria.

The United Firefighters Union of Australia also said that in Canberra, where there were horrible fires in 2003, fire services were warned to prepare for more than 200 percent increase in extreme fire days by 2050.
The union has officially warned the Rudd government about this risk. The federal government has been asked to re-assess its approach in tackling global warming.

Natural disasters still claim a great deal of lives even in Australia, a country with an advanced disaster management system. Therefore, the government is forced to change it bushfire early warning system. The success of the early warning system in saving lives has already been utilized for tropical cyclones. The last severe (category 5) Tropical Cyclone Larry in, for example, caused huge property damage; however no lives were lost and no serious injuries were reported.

It is now worthwhile to ask how about our own home, Indonesia. The rainy season has become a time of misery for many parts of this beautiful country. Floods are everywhere. It even has become part of daily life of Jakarta’s people. Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Java suffered from massive flooding and landslides. When it is dry season, drought replaces the flood. Not only humans, but animals also suffer from another tragedy: forest fires. We are also shadowed by the possibility of reoccurring earthquakes.

The good thing is, although I think it is also a bad thing, people are not complaining too much to the government. However, the worst part of the story is the problems are predicted to become worse in the near future. So, be ready!

Unfortunately, our desire to cut down ecologically important forests remains high. The Ministry of Forestry continues to receive proposals from many regency administrations to convert their very ecologically substantial forest areas. In fact, many floods occur because of the destruction of watershed areas.

The ill-managed watersheds result in flooding in the rainy season and droughts in the dry season. Agriculturally important areas are the worst affected. Poor farmers, consequently, become the first victims. We have to start thinking comprehensively and preventively to protect our natural forests, which can save our lives.

The other important issue is the lack of disaster management, which would enable us to prevent devastation. We were already alerted by the huge loss of lives after the tsunami. It is not impossible that a similar tragedy will happen again. Therefore, the early warning system has to be well-managed and operated.

Since we are living on the Pacific Ring of Fire, on which earthquake occurs frequently, we need an appropriate plan to save lives in the event of natural disasters. Evacuation schemes and shelters, for example, have to be built and well-managed in every part of Indonesia. A warning system for tropical cyclones - which can cause strong currents, giant waves and strong winds - also needs to be initiated. This would be important for fishermen, people living in the coastal areas and the transportation sector.

We may not be able to fully prevent the loss of property due to natural disasters, but we could save many lives of our fellow Indonesians with an appropriate disaster management plan. And, life is much more important than just properties.

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