

Treading Water

A NORTH JAKARTA NEIGHBOURHOOD'S STRUGGLE AGAINST THE FLOOD



▲ The residents of North Jakarta neighbourhood 'RT 20' have endured weeks of flooded streets.

▶▲ The pumping station that was built to remove water from the artificial lake near 'RT 20' is clogged with garbage; a man in a boat sifts through it for anything of value.

▶▼ A bag of aluminum cans and plastic that can be recycled sits next to a young girl who lives in a stilted *kampung* in the neighbourhood.

There is a neighbourhood in North Jakarta that stretches from a fish market in the south, and then around the Jakarta Bay to a *waduk* (man-made lake) in the north. It sits between the West Canal and the Muara Angke River. But it is not the kind of waterfront property that sets Jakarta's hungry developers drooling.

This is RT 20, or what the residents here laughingly refer to as "TPAA" (*Tempat Penbuang Ahir Air*), literally, "the place where the last water is dumped". The people of RT 20 live in the sewage that comes downstream from Bogor and Depok and on to the Jakarta megacity, now over 12 million strong. The capital is a city without a sewage system, so the river itself serves the purpose. During high tides, this year's uncommonly heavy rains and slowly rising sea levels, believed to be linked to rising global temperatures, are compounding problems caused by Jakarta's poor infra-structure and development. Garbage flows downstream into the neighbourhood, where



ASSIGNMENT

it collects under *kampungs* (a Malay hamlet or village) on stilts and floods homes. The people here are sometimes up to their knees – even chests – in it.

The most recent wet season was a particularly bad one in Jakarta. Much of the sprawling megalopolis is still reeling from the February floods – many say the worst they have seen in its history. More than 50 have been killed by drowning or electrocution in affected areas across more than half of the city.

Same Garbage, Different Day

The residents of RT 20 have been living in flood conditions since late November, when very high tides broke through the neighbourhood's seawall. As the water finally began to slowly recede, heavy downpours in mid-December brought a second deluge. By the time the tides began to rise again later in the month, the neighbourhood's distraught inhabitants had been living in sewage water for the better part of a month. Local leaders say that about 80 percent of RT 20's 2,500 people have been affected.

In RT 20, people are not dying and injuries are minimal. And although a few houses near the seawall sustained significant damage, the *kampungs* at the end of the seawall are in relatively sound structural condition. Both residents and community leaders can agree that flooding is a part of life here. But the problem is rapidly getting worse.

Ahmad Fauzi, the elected head of the neighbourhood, explains that the 234-metre seawall surrounding RT 20 has never been raised – even though sea levels have been steadily on the rise. In 1984, he says, when there used to be mangrove forests to help protect the *kampungs*, the seawalls were two metres above the waterline. The forest has since been razed and the neighbourhood has never been able to afford much beyond sandbags to bolster their defenses against the rising water.

No Choice but to Adapt

By the end of December, the stretch of main road on the south side that led to RT 20 had been submerged in a metre of water for more than a week. The people who would normally be delivering goods and going to work in factories were stranded. Shopkeepers could do little but pass the time sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes, their feet dangling in the impenetrable brown stew. A cottage industry of makeshift water taxis has since sprung up: some rickshaw drivers have raised the seats on their vehicles; some make a pittance helping to pull the cycles around unseen potholes and past obstacles of underwater garbage mounds. Children sift through the rubbish with sticks and nets. One young girl says that she is looking for a toy, though the bag that sits next to her is full of recyclable plastic and aluminum cans. Many of the children who live in RT 20 have visible sores on their legs.



“It’s all because of the policies of a government that encourages development that’s not good for the environment,” insists Harry Surjadi, founder of the Society of Indonesian Environmental Journalists and a Knight International Journalism Fellow. He had been a resident of Jakarta for almost 40 years, but finally moved to the fast-growing suburb of Depok as air quality and sanitation in the city deteriorated. “I’ve seen the changes,” he says, “and it’s frustrating.”

Development such as the high-rise condominiums going up in the south of the city and the reclamation of wetlands in the north, according to Surjadi, has totally neglected to take into account where the waste goes. That poor planning, compounded by increasingly severe rainy seasons and Jakarta’s exploding population growth, are pushing the capital beyond its limits. Laments Pak Udin, a water seller in RT 20 who came to Jakarta to find work 15 years ago, “We’re worried and scared but we’re forced to stay here. Outside Jakarta, there is not much work.”

Water, Water, Everywhere

Kartiniti’s is typical of the stories of the poverty-stricken families trying to survive in RT 20. She lives just inside a hole in the wall on the east side in a particularly crowded *kampung*, near a pump clogged with garbage. Her husband, Lima, also sells water from a well to local residents, and their eldest child, 15, works in a bird’s nest factory.

Her family lives in a tiny, three-by-three metre room, which was flooded up to her thighs this morning. Under the wood-planked walkways, the rubbish moves slowly with the flow, collecting and piling up in corners – the foul water periodically splashing through the slits. She has a four-month-old boy, the youngest of her five children, who has been constantly itching and crying since the floods began.

Lima sits with the baby a few feet away. When the streets are flooded, he cannot sell much water because of how difficult it is to get his long cart to and from the pumping station. He normally sells four cartloads of water per day, but these days he can only sell one.

◀▲ (top two) There are over 600 households in RT 20. The homes of about 80 percent of residents have been affected by the flooding.

◀▼ (bottom two) Water sellers would normally bring cans of drinking water to the neighbourhood, but floods contaminate pumping stations and make transporting the long carts difficult.

► The home of a fisherman named Pata Muda sits opposite RT 20’s seawall, which was breached in November. The inside of the house was reduced to rubble, but luckily there were no major injuries.

Too Little, Too Late

Because the floods are contaminating the wells, clean water is now only available for two hours a day. Although the government is giving RT 20 a daily subsidy of 5,000 litres, residents say that people would need ten times what they are offered. “People here are happy they’re getting help, but to be honest, it’s just not enough,” says Ahmad Fauzi.

There is little doubt that state aid during the flood season is patchy and insufficient. In over a month of flooding, Kartiniti and Lima’s family of seven has received 50 packages of dry noodles and 30 litres of rice. Their rent of 100,000 rupiah (US\$11) per day includes rent, but not water. Lima’s clients – his neighbours – often buy water on credit, but can ill afford to go into debt. As Lima explains, families who cannot find the money to pay for the water will simply be cutting their intake in half this month.

Sandrine Capelle-Manuel, Urban Programme Director of the non-profit group Mercy Corps Indonesia, says that chronic health problems such as diarrhoea and skin-related diseases are among the first to appear in flood conditions. Its projects in Jakarta include efforts to provide healthcare to neighbourhoods like RT 20.

RT 20’s problems are about development – “It’s a local issue, not a global issue,” explains Surjadi. Climate change is making the flooding worse, but without much hope of the rainy season getting easier, the only solutions for North Jakarta neighbourhoods are for economic opportunities to arise outside of Jakarta, and for the government to reign in unscrupulous developers. ■



ANGILEE SHAH is a writer based in Singapore.

JACQUELINE KOCH has more than a decade of experience in international journalism as a photographer and reporter.