

Background to Support for the Karo Batak Protestant Church, Indonesia

Mt Sinabung in North Sumatra, Indonesia, has featured almost daily in the international news since major eruptions began in October and November 2013.

Standing alone on a highland plateau Sinabung had been dormant for 400 years until eruptions in 2010 caused major evacuations and damage to the rich farming land on its flanks. By December 2010 the mountain seemed quiet, and was reopened for hikers and climbers.

In September 2013 there was a new flare-up, the beginning of a frightening and continuing series of earthquakes and eruptions producing dense clouds of ash, explosions of rock, and super-heated gas clouds of 700° C spreading at 800 kph. On 1 February the lava dome collapsed increasing the flow of rocks, gas and the ash which now covers much of countryside, and claiming the first lives.

Situated along the Pacific Ring of Fire Indonesia has a sophisticated Disaster Mitigation Agency and advanced geological and vulcanology services but because Sinabung had been dormant since 1600 it has been difficult to anticipate what might happen next. Over 30,000 people were quickly evacuated from more than 30 villages.

Volcanic soils in Indonesia are rich and fertile and farmers cultivate land well up Sinabung's flanks - since 2010 ready to leave quickly. But the on-going pattern of eruptions this time led to impatience. Farmers have dodged security to check their homes and fields, and a mid-January lull perhaps led some to hope that, like 2010, things would settle down quickly.

Among the 16 fatalities in early February were seven members of the Kutacane branch of the Indonesian Student Christian Movement, from neighbouring Aceh province, working as volunteers seeking to warn farmers to leave the 5km exclusion zone. At 4.5 km they were caught in a gas cloud and perished.

The Karo highlands is a Christian majority region of Indonesia and the Protestant and Catholic churches, along with Muslim agencies, have had a major role in caring for the 32,351 evacuees, from 9,991 families, gathered in 42 shelter centres.

The President, his wife and staff have spent time amid the evacuees, and impressive programmes are in place to provide schooling for evacuated children and youth, cash-for-work programmes to allow displaced families to support themselves, loan rescheduling and credit facilities. New land is being found for those who can never return to what were their homes.

But much of the personal caring and the support of both the families allowed to return to rehabilitate ruined homes and fields and those from fifteen villages inside the 5km zone who are not allowed to return will fall to community organisations. The Karo Batak Protestant Church (GBKP), with which New Zealand Presbyterians have had a significant relationship, is the largest non-governmental organisation in the Karo homeland, and will carry a corresponding level of responsibility, now and in the long period ahead – whatever the mountain does. Houses and fields, trees and crops are covered in deep layers of ash. The sources of income for many families have been devastated. The high ash plumes continue and we are told the clouds travel further each day. The immediate future is unclear.

The government has made quick and effective responses to the situation, and local people are contributing generously in a community which has always had patterns of mutual

assistance, but gifts of assistance from partner churches overseas will bring the assurance that networks made in calmer times have stood the test of time, and still offer solidarity in times of crisis.

The Presbyterian relationship with GBKP began when Ian Cairns, university chaplain in Bandung, West Java, befriended Karo students who were far from home, and accompanied teams of them when they returned to join village evangelisation programmes in the Karo homeland. In 1972 Simon and Marion Rae were invited to join GBKP, serving firstly in Bandung and later in the Karo homeland, and they represented PCANZ at the GBKP centennial in 1990. Other appointments followed and projects were supported, but as GBKP grew and developed there was less call for this level of support. Now, in a time of sudden, unanticipated need we can renew the solidarity of our partnership by offering practical, material assistance, and our prayers for those who serve the needs of anxious and distressed people, uncertain of where their future lies.

Rev. Dr. Simon Rae
February 2014

Further information about this can be gained by contacting Simon Rae directly,
simon.rae@xtra.co.nz