

**M**ount Merapi signifies many things to many people. To geologists, it is an important active volcano near Yogyakarta, Indonesia and one of many along the 'Pacific Ring of Fire'. To the locals living around the volcano, it is home to spirits that protect them. To disaster management experts, however, Merapi has come to signify the importance of preparedness for any impending emergency.

This year, the first warning signs from Mount Merapi appeared on 15 April, when occasional bursts of dust and lava from the volcano were reported. An alert was issued by the Directorate of Volcanology and Geological Hazard Mitigation. As more lava poured out, tremors increased and 'heat clouds' were formed, the



*Mount Merapi blows huge toxic hot clouds*

## Preparing for Mt. Merapi's eruption

alert was raised to the highest level.

With more than 64000 people at risk, the Government of Indonesia took immediate steps recognizing the imminent danger of a volcanic eruption. Medical teams were put in place at strategic locations and were operational round-the-clock. The traffic line for evacuation having been estab-

lished, local authorities readied school buildings, village halls, private houses and other sites as shelters for people who might need to be evacuated. The Central Government supplied the basic emergency requirements including rice, tents, medical supplies, blankets and communication equipment. Mobile clinics were also arranged for. The government had

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also allocated Rp 30 billion for emergency response by 26 April.

The most vulnerable population—the elderly, children and pregnant women—were evacuated as the situation appeared to worsen. Medical teams were relocated from 29 health centres to provide essential medical services to those likely to be affected. Specialist teams composed of emergency, CDC, medical care and public health experts have provided necessary technical and operational support to the local health facilities to manage the IDP evacuation camps and raise public health awareness. Four referral hospitals were notified.

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Yogyakarta earthquake of 27 May, and the volcanic dome slowly began collapsing. By 9 June, the volcano had blown its largest heat cloud to date necessitating the evacuation of more than 12000 people in Mageland district to over 30 camps. WHO joined a government emergency team for a rapid on-site assessment. WHO had been working closely with the government and providing technical assistance and resources as required. The Organization helped develop a contingency plan and supplied emergency and surgical kits. WHO also worked closely with the Ministry of Health to initiate the Health Emergency Operations Units. These are four-wheel drive vehicles equipped with workstations, including a public announcement system, computer with printer, radio, telephone, satellite communications and many other features needed during emergencies. These were dispatched to strengthen coordination, communications and command at the field level.

The alert level for Mount Merapi has subsequently been reduced to level 3 as volcanic activity has decreased. Nevertheless, the preparations made for the potential emergency proved useful when the earthquake hit Yogyakarta on 27 May 2006. ■



*Villagers on the slopes of the Merapi returned to their homes from the IDPI shelters when there was a lull in volcanic activity.*