

In the Why of the Storm

The 2025 Sumatra disaster exposed the intertwined crises of environmental degradation, fragmented governance and coastal vulnerability

Predictions on the potential scale and effects of the climate crisis have long been undertaken by scientists and experts, including the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In 2018, the FAO published a study titled 'Impacts of Climate Change on Fisheries and Aquaculture', which highlights various significant impacts on fisheries management in general, including on small-scale fisheries, fishers and coastal communities. One key finding presented in the document is that more than 80 percent of all disaster events with major social and economic impacts are climate-related disasters. As one of the world's largest archipelagic nations, situated along the Ring of Fire, Indonesia is no stranger to natural disasters.

In late November 2025, a series of severe hydrometeorological disasters – including flash floods, river overflows,

and landslides – struck the northern and central regions of Sumatra. The most severe impacts were concentrated in three provinces: Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), North Sumatra (SUMUT), and West Sumatra (SUMBAR). Extreme weather conditions began on November 22 and peaked on November 25, triggering floods and landslides. Rainfall intensity then subsided starting on November 27.

The most severely affected areas in each province were: Aceh Tamiang (Aceh), Agam (West Sumatra), Sibolga (North Sumatra), North Tapanuli (North Sumatra), Central Tapanuli (North Sumatra), and South Tapanuli (North Sumatra). According to the latest data from the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), at least 1,208 people have died, 137 are still missing, and 1,715 families have been displaced as of the time of writing. As of January 27, 2026, 111,800 people

Data	Details
The main affected provinces	Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (Aceh), North Sumatra (SUMUT), and West Sumatra (SUMBAR).
Time of the disaster	November 22-25, 2025
Most severely affected areas (with province)	Aceh Tamiang (Aceh), Agam (West Sumatra), Sibolga (North Sumatra), North Tapanuli (North Sumatra), Central Tapanuli (North Sumatra), and South Tapanuli (North Sumatra).
The total number of deaths	1,208 people
Missing person/not yet found	137 people
Internally Displaced Persons	1,715 families
	111,800 people
The total number of damaged homes	247,949 homes

General data on the disasters in Sumatra, November 2025

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have been displaced, with a total of 247,949 homes damaged.

The hydrometeorological conditions, characterised by heavy rainfall that intensified with the arrival of the rare and deadly Tropical Cyclone Senyar in the Malacca Strait, were among the key natural phenomena behind the scale of the disaster. Tropical Cyclone Senyar affected the Malaysian Peninsula and southern Thailand before moving toward Sumatra, Indonesia, in November 2025. The Tropical Cyclone Senyar phenomenon caused heavy rainfall to intensify into extreme weather, becoming the primary trigger for floods, landslides, and flash floods in Sumatra.

The massive extreme rainfall resulted in floods, landslides, and widespread devastation – a combination of extreme weather and ecological vulnerability caused by the degradation of forest and natural resources exploited in the

destructive impact on coastal fishing communities, paralysing fishing activities due to the accumulation of logs and trash in the waters. This damage has ruined fishing nets, drastically reduced catch yields, damaged coastal/pond ecosystems, and threatened safety. Fishermen were forced to moor their boats, resulting in a significant loss of income.

Slow disaster response: Declaration of a National Disaster

Given the urgency and severity of the adverse impacts, the government's response – particularly in the regions of Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra – appeared extremely slow, poorly coordinated, and failed to address urgent needs, including those of coastal communities and other isolated areas where road access, transportation, and even communication infrastructure had been destroyed. In fact, at the time of writing, some disaster-affected areas were yet to receive assistance.

The fundamental principle of disaster management, as enshrined under Law No. 24/2007 concerning Disaster Management, emphasises the need to provide “swift and precise” response in accordance with on-the-ground conditions. This principle serves as an absolute standard that must be met by both the central and local governments in all disaster response efforts. This time sensitivity relates to the “Golden Time” concept in disaster management, which is no more than 72 hours (3 days). An example of the government's rapid response to a natural disaster came two decades prior, during the Yogyakarta-Central Java Earthquake that occurred in the morning of May 27, 2006. Within a 24 hour-span, then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono had visited the disaster site (in the afternoon), and stayed overnight in Yogyakarta. This was despite the fact that the 2006 earthquake was not designated as a National Disaster. Meanwhile, President Prabowo Subianto did not visit the site of the Sumatra earthquake until December 1, 2026. In fact, criticism from members of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) two

The flash floods and the resulting debris flow have had a destructive impact on coastal fishing communities, paralysing fishing activities due to the accumulation of logs and trash in the waters

upstream areas, leading to disasters downstream. Continuous heavy rainfall increases water volume in the upstream areas, but the water is not retained or absorbed in the watershed, causing it to eventually overflow. This situation is exacerbated by regional weather phenomena such as monsoon winds and cyclonic circulation, which trigger the formation of extremely heavy rain clouds. Therefore, this disaster cannot be classified as a purely hydrometeorological disaster, but rather as an ecological disaster caused by natural climate anomalies impacted by the climate crisis, and compounded by massive exploitation of nature.

The disaster has also affected coastal communities in the upstream areas, particularly small-scale fishers along the western and eastern coasts of Sumatra. The flash floods and the resulting debris flow have had a

AFP/GETTY



Flooding in Bengkulu, Sumatra, Indonesia

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weeks after the government's disaster response – specifically regarding the National Search and Rescue Agency (BASARNAS) – suggested that officials appeared confused, as they failed to ensure a responsive disaster response during the critical 'golden time'.

Hitherto, the central government has not acknowledged the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a National Disaster, with the President explaining on various occasions that it was not designated as such. One of the reasons given to the public was that the Sumatra disaster did not affect all the 38 provinces in Indonesia – only three provinces were impacted, leaving the rest unaffected. However, Article 7 of Law No. 24/2007 concerning Disaster Management has already established general criteria for determining the status and level of national and regional disasters, including the number of victims, level of property damage, damage to infrastructure and facilities, the extent of the affected area, and the resulting socioeconomic impacts. It is also

important to note that, as of the writing of this article, there are no particular government regulations available that specify the criteria for categorising a national disaster. In terms of precedents from previous disasters: the earthquake and tsunami in Flores, East Nusa Tenggara Province in 1992; the Indian Ocean (Aceh) tsunami in 2004; and the COVID-19 pandemic were all declared as national disasters.

The lack of acknowledgement as to the disaster's 'status' has led to questions about the role of the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB). In fact, BNPB has established protocols for declaring a state of national disaster emergency. In simple terms, a state of national disaster emergency is declared when it is determined that the affected province lacks the capacity to handle the disaster. Once a formal request from the provincial government affected by the disaster is issued, the Governor of the affected province initiates the declaration procedure through an official and formal request addressed

REUTERS



An aerial photograph shows extensive flooding in Kuala Simpang, Indonesia's Aceh province, following heavy rains

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to the President. This statement details the inability of the province to fully manage the emergency response and requests that the status of the disaster be elevated to a national disaster emergency. Upon receipt of

welcomed domestic or international initiatives to address the impacts and has apparently even rejected foreign aid. These actions have led to inconsistencies in post-disaster response and recovery efforts, given that local authorities lack the necessary capacity to respond and require strategic and systematic guidance from the central government.

The failure to declare the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a National Disaster has prompted civil society to sue the government using the 'citizen lawsuit' mechanism

this statement, the central government could still not decide to designate the event as a national disaster.

The failure to declare the 2025 Sumatra disaster as a National Disaster has prompted civil society to sue the government using the "citizen lawsuit" mechanism. The lawsuit challenges the government's administrative actions, which appear to downplay the severity of the disaster. The government has not

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Environment has filed a civil lawsuit against six companies suspected of clearing land through deforestation, which contributed to the scale of devastation caused by the floods and landslides in Sumatra. The lawsuit, which seeks damages in excess of IDR 4 trillion, aims to "uphold ecological justice and the principle of non-discriminatory law enforcement". Concurrently, the Forest Area Enforcement Task Force (Satgas PKH) revoked the operating permits of 28 companies in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra that were "proven to have committed violations".

Post-disaster recovery and reconstruction planning

Although it was not declared a national disaster, the Indonesian government continued to provide support for disaster recovery efforts in Sumatra. The central government's specific response was only implemented on January 8, 2026, with the formation of the Task Force for the Acceleration of Post-Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction of Sumatra. A week prior, the DPR RI had established the House of Representatives' Post-Disaster Recovery Task Force (S Satgas Galapana) on December 30, 2025. More recently (as of the time of writing), there has been a statement regarding the government's allocation of IDR 100.1 trillion towards the Sumatra Post-Disaster Recovery Budget over a three-year period from 2026 to 2028.

The government, through BAPPENAS, subsequently issued the Master Plan for the Acceleration of Post-Natural Disaster Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Aceh Province, North Sumatra Province, and West Sumatra Province (Renduk PRRP Sumatra). Renduk PRRP Sumatra consists of five documents: the main volume and three related to provinces – Renduk PRRP for Aceh Province, Renduk PRRP for North Sumatra Province, and Renduk PRRP for West Sumatra Province – as well as the PRRP Action Plans from 32 ministries and government agencies. The PRRP Sumatra Draft is expected to be developed as a follow-up to Presidential Decree No. 1/2026, which will subsequently be finalised by the PRR Task Force and then issued as a presidential regulation.

The Sumatra Renduk document contains general data on stakeholders in the marine and fisheries sector, including capture fishermen, fish farmers, and fish processors. The document tallies the total number of fishers impacted by the disaster across the three provinces at 38,285 (with 33,267 in Aceh, 2,332 in North Sumatra, and 2,686 in West Sumatra). Data on the number of vessels affected totals 3,612 across the three provinces, (with 3,210 vessels in Aceh, 369 in North Sumatra, and 33 in West Sumatra). A quick review of the document revealed no specific distinctions regarding small-

scale fisheries or small-scale fishers, which appears to indicate that there has been no differentiation between small-scale fishers and other fishermen across the sector. Meanwhile, the BNPB has recognised in its strategic plan that climate change has a serious impact on marine ecosystems and coastal communities, particularly small-scale fisherfolk.

Policies for the protection of small-scale fishermen in disasters

Referring to the SSF Guidelines, countries are urged to recognise that disasters and the impacts of climate change affect poor and marginalised communities in specific and distinct ways. The Indonesian government must fully consult with small-scale fishing communities, including Indigenous Peoples, cutting across gender lines (given the different ways disasters impact men and women). The SSF Guidelines also call for special support to be given to affected communities on small islands.

Indonesia is strongly committed to protecting fishermen by enacting legislation pertaining to the Protection and Empowerment of Fishermen, Fish Farmers, and Salt Farmers (Law No. 7/2016). One of the mandates under Law No. 7/2016 is the formulation of a strategic protection plan to provide safeguards against risks in fishing, including fish farming and salt production. These include risks posed by natural disasters, fish disease outbreaks, the impacts of climate change, and pollution. Law No. 7/2016 not only applies to small-scale fishers, traditional fishers, and fish workers, but also to owners of fishing vessels ranging from 10 GT to 60 GT.

Therefore, the process of formulating and finalising the PRRP Sumatra Draft must involve small-scale fishers and the various organizations representing them. The Sumatra PRRP Draft specifically needs to recognise the specific challenges faced by small-scale and traditional fishers in a manner aligned with the contexts, needs and circumstances of coastal fishing communities, particularly those on small islands.

For more



Menggugat Tindakan Administrasi Negara dalam Penanganan Bencana Ekologis Sumatera

<https://ylbhi.or.id/informasi/siaran-pers/menggugat-tindakan-administrasi-negara-dalam-penanganan-bencana-ekologis-sumatera/>

The government filed a lawsuit of Rp4.8 trillion and revoked the company's license related to the disaster in Sumatra, will it be effective?

<https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/articles/ckgx9g41e6vo>

Pemerintah Finalisasi Rencana Induk Pemulihan Pascabencana Sumatra

<https://www.bnpb.go.id/berita/pemerintah-finalisasi-rencana-induk-pemulihan-pascabencana-sumatra>

BNPB Regulation No. 5/2025 regarding Strategic Plan of BNPB Year 2025-2029

<https://siapsiaga.or.id/bnpb-supports-bali-in-integrating-disaster-management-plan-in-the-rpjmd-20252029/>

SSF disaster risks and climate change

<https://www.fao.org/voluntary-guidelines-small-scale-fisheries/key-thematic-areas/disaster-risk-and-climate-change/3/en>