

## Natural disasters rain upon Indonesia

SARAH BLAU | STAFF WRITER

Torrential rain. Spewing mud. Earthquakes. Landslides. Drought. Bird flu. And a wall of water four stories tall. Welcome to Indonesia.

Over the past two and a half years, Indonesia has been victim to a multitude of natural disasters. From non-stop flooding to volcanic eruptions and even a freak mud geyser, Indonesia is seemingly a magnet for natural catastrophe.

Just two weeks ago, three-quarters of the nation's capital city, Jakarta, were underwater due to weeks of non-stop rain, according to The New York Times. At least 80 people are reported dead from either drowning or electrocution.

On Feb. 17 and 18, eight people died and six were missing when floods caused two separate landslides, according to Reuters.

On May 29, a mud geyser erupted, sending mud flying and causing the evacuation of thousands from their homes. The mud geyser or mud volcano continues to belch forth between 7,000 and 150,000 cubic meters of mud every day since the eruption, according to GSA Today, a journal of the Geological Society of America.

"Tectonically they're where all the action is," said associate professor of geology Dave Dobson. "Indonesia is on the edge of a trench where the Pacific plates are underneath the Australian plate, and whenever that happens you'll see a bunch of earthquakes, and you also get volcanoes."

In addition to being tectonically active, Indonesia is climatologically active.

"That area is very sensitive to El Niño," said Dobson. "At different times in the El Niño cycle you end up with a lot of extra rain falling here, causing flooding. At other parts of the El Niño cycle you end up with

all the rain that would fall here falling out in the middle of the Pacific, and at that point they have a bad drought."

Despite geological reasons for the disasters, some Indonesians wonder if the increase in disastrous events recently may be the result of supernatural powers. A few speculate that the president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, has brought a curse to their country.

"Since the day he took office there have been unending disasters," said parliament member Permadi to The New York Times.

This viewpoint presents an aspect of mysticism that many Indonesians reflect. The major religion of Indonesia is Islam. However, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies Eric Mortensen points out that Islamic mysticism is not prominent in Indonesia.

"It is not so much about Islamic mysticism as it is about the non-Islamic, or perhaps more accurately pre-Islamic, belief systems continuing to thrive, particularly in times of crisis," said Mortensen.

In response to the curse theory Dobson said, "There are enough really obvious geological and climatic reasons why these things are happening."

But mystics like Permadi say that Yudhoyono was born under a bad sign, and nature is directing its anger for the president towards the country.

"Empirical scientific explanations for events comprise only one modality of worldview," said Mortensen. "Scientific explanations are no more 'true' than others. What matters, really, in this case, is that some Indonesians believe in possibilities and causalities outside of the scientific frame. I think we must be careful to avoid categorizing such beliefs as necessarily incorrect."

## Nigeria considers anti-homosexual bill

BRICE TARLETON | STAFF WRITER

Homosexual sex between consenting adults in Nigeria is currently a crime punishable by 14 years in prison. Bayo Ojo, Nigeria's minister of justice, recently proposed a bill calling for five years of imprisonment for any act supporting homosexuality.

"Same-sex relationships are characterized by unhealthy behavior including instability, promiscuity and risky sexual practices," said Friday Okonofua, Nigeria's special adviser to the president, to the Associated Press. "That means effort to reduce the consequences of same-sex marriage is an important public health initiative."

The bill, if passed into law, will outlaw membership in a gay group, attending a gay meeting or protest, donating money to a gay organization, expressing same-sex love in letters or e-mail, attending a same-sex marriage or blessing ceremony, or viewing homosexual acts in videos, photographs, Web sites or books. Same-sex marriage licenses conferred in other countries will be invalidated, and any contact whatsoever between two or more gay people will become illegal.

According to the BBC, the National Muslim Center has decried homosexual relationships as "immoral, (running) contrary to our cultural and religious values." The Christian Association of Nigeria also calls for an accelerated passage of the bill into law, describing same-sex unions as "barbaric and shameful."

"Sociologists and historians in Nigeria have access to the same information that we do, which tells us that homosexuality has existed since the birth of time," said Kathy Tritschler, associate professor of sports studies and teacher for "Human Sexuality," an interdisciplinary studies course. "It is a mystery why the ruling electoral body has reached a conclusion which says otherwise."

Over 100 petitions from human rights

groups have been submitted to the committee conducting the public hearing, asking that the proposed bill be withdrawn. Four envoys from the United Nations have condemned the bill as a violation of international human rights law.

"(The bill implies) serious consequences for the exercise of the freedom of expression and opinion. (It would) contravene the Universal Declaration that 'all human beings are born equal in dignity and rights,'" the envoys said in a public statement, according to the BBC.

The United Nations have also issued statements warning that the bill will promote, rather than reduce, the spread of HIV and AIDS, refuting Okonofua's proclamations.

Dr. Pierre Mpele, the U.N. AIDS country coordinator in Nigeria, told the BBC, "Failing to acknowledge sex between men will only increase the vulnerability of men — and women — to HIV infection, since men who cannot talk about their sexual orientation are less likely to seek appropriate support services."

Senior Ted Wilkinson, vice president of Guil-

ford's PRIDE, said, "The worldwide homosexual community has a lot of work to do. People need to recognize that this kind of discrimination is not just in Africa, but everywhere."

"In America, we pride ourselves as being on the forefront of human-rights issues, but the Supreme Court didn't lift the ban on sodomy until 2003," said senior Kym Teslik, president of Guilford's PRIDE. "The quest for equality of the queer community takes time, and there is still a lot of progress to be made."

Though South Africa recently legalized gay marriages, homosexuality continues to be taboo across most of Africa. The bill is relatively popular in Nigeria and political experts expect it to be passed by both chambers of the Nigerian National Assembly by the end of March.

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Friday Okonofua

Nigeria's special adviser to the president

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