

## GENERAL TRAVEL ADVICE FOR INDONESIA IN RESPONSE TO FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE ADVICE

**Prepared by Operation Wallacea January 2011**

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) current lists Indonesia as '...a country the FCO advises against all travel to parts of'. Here at Operation Wallacea we agree this is fair and accurate advice, there are **areas** of Indonesia that you should not travel to, but we also feel that the perceived risk of travel to Indonesia is greatly inflated. Though we agree that travelling to Aceh, certain areas of Papua and a small pocket of central Sulawesi is not advisable, this should not affect your decision to travel to the rest of Indonesia.

When assessing the risk of travelling to Indonesia it is crucial to understand the scale and political history of the country. Indonesia is a huge country stretching 1250 miles north to south and a massive 3250 miles from east to west. This sounds big but can only truly be appreciated by comparing it to Europe. The distance between London and Kiev in the Ukraine is only 1300 miles and the distance between the most easterly and most westerly points in Indonesia is the same as the distance between England and China! Indonesia is a relatively new country; it only became independent in 1945, and the population is made up of a number of ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have very different cultures, beliefs and characteristics. For these reasons very different factors affect different areas of the country and giving general travel advice for Indonesia is practically impossible. You would not advise against travelling to Belgium because of Basque separatists in Spain. It would be just as unreasonable to cancel a trip to Buton because of troubles in Maluku.

We have compiled risk assessments for South East Sulawesi, the area in which we operate, based on information from various agencies and our experience of over ten years of conservation expeditions in the area. These risk assessments are available on our website.

The FCO highlights six potential concerns in their summary of the travel advice for travelling to Indonesia. We have addressed these six concerns in more detail below.

### **1. Terrorism**

Since the Bali bomb of 2002 there can be no denying that terrorism is a potential threat in some parts of Indonesia. Tourist areas, especially those close to the Islamic strongholds of South Eastern Java (i.e. Bali), have been targeted, as have western interests in Jakarta. We agree that terrorism continues to be a threat, especially in the tourist areas of Bali. However, the area we operate has practically no tourism and relatively few western interests. There is no history of terrorism in the area we operate and no specific caution from FCO other than the general warning given for all Indonesia.

In our opinion the risk of terrorism in the area we operate is very small indeed. When travelling in the tourist centres such as Bali we advise our volunteers to

exercise caution but even in these areas we don't believe the risk of terrorism to be any greater than in London, Madrid or New York.

## **2. Civil Unrest/Political Tension**

The FCO advises against all travel to certain parts of Indonesia due to the potential for violent protests, civil conflicts and interracial tension. There are three main causes of civil unrest and political tension that may lead to violence in Indonesia. These are:

- The independence movements such as those in Aceh and Papua.
- Inter-religious and inter-racial tension in areas such as Central Sulawesi and Maluku.
- Anti government groups and violence towards major western concerns such as in Northern Kalimantan and Papua.

None of these apply to South East Sulawesi - the area in which we operate. Independence movements are exclusively based either on colonial factors or religious motivations. Timor and Papua do not have the traditions of Dutch rule, a factor which unites the rest of the country and as such these areas do not feel part of the Republic of Indonesia. This sometimes spills out in independence protests, which can lead to violence. This simply does not apply to South East Sulawesi, an area that is a fully integrated part of the Republic. There are also independence movements in areas where the community want to impose Islamic (Shari'a) law, something the Indonesian government is keen to avoid. This applies to the troubles in Aceh. There is no movement for Shari'a law in South East Sulawesi.

Inter-religious and to a lesser extent inter-racial tension has been a problem in Indonesia in recent years, specifically in Central Sulawesi and Ambon. The reasons for this tension are complicated but troubles such as these tend to occur in areas with roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims where there is no dominant ethnic group. In these areas different ethnic or religious groups vie for power in the (highly lucrative) local government. These political campaigns can become highly charged and erupt into ethnic or religious violence. In South East Sulawesi the majority of the population is Muslim though there are small numbers of Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. There are no racial tensions, no history of violence and all the religious communities are fully integrated. We do not feel there is any threat from troubles of this sort in the area in which we operate.

There have been some violent demonstrations in areas where Western companies are carrying out widescale deforestation or strip mining. These simply do not occur in Sulawesi and are confined to Papua and Northern Kalimantan. There is no history of anti-government movements in South East Sulawesi.

## **3. Crime**

In the decade that Operation Wallacea has been operating in South East Sulawesi we have taken thousands of people to our sites. We have never had a single incidence of violent crime towards any of our staff or volunteers. In fact the only crime encountered has been a handful of thefts from unattended bags etc. There have

been no reports of increased street crime and there is nothing to suggest that this situation is likely to change. Indonesia as a whole is a very safe country and crime towards foreigners is almost unheard of. Indeed, the FCO website warns against theft and being overcharged by taxi's etc but makes no mention of violent crime.

#### **4. Natural Disasters**

It is true that Indonesia is a tectonically active area and earthquakes are relatively common. However Indonesia is a very large country and the risks associated with natural disasters are quite different in different areas. The highest risk from earthquakes is associated with the subduction zone where the Australia plate is pushing under the Eurasia Plate. This subduction zone is marked by the island chain that makes up a large part of Indonesia and runs through Sumatra, Java, Bali and eventually on to Timor. This area is tectonically active and is the site of regular earthquakes and volcanic activity in Java and the earthquake in Aceh that triggered the Boxing Day tsunami. Sulawesi, and more specifically Buton (the island on which we operate), are not part of this island chain and are not affected by the subduction zone. Therefore the risk of serious earthquakes and associated tsunami's here is much less than on the Sumatra/Java/Timor island group. That is not to say there is no tectonic activity, mild tremors happen a couple of times a year and there is even an occasional quake. In recent years there have been quakes in 1992 and in 2005 though neither of these caused any significant damage to buildings and there are no records of earthquake related fatalities in South East Sulawesi in the last hundred years. It can sometimes be difficult to comprehend the distances involved in a country as large as Indonesia. The recent earthquake in Java was 750 miles from where we operate and the Aceh quake that triggered the tsunami was over 2000 miles away. To put this in context, the Java earthquake was the same distance from Buton as London is from Bern in Switzerland and the earthquake in Aceh was further away than London is from Kiev in the Ukraine.

#### **5. Air Travel**

Indonesian airlines do not operate to the same high safety standards as European or North American airlines. This was highlighted when the EU banned all Indonesian airlines from European airspace in June 2007. The ban followed two serious incidents earlier in the year. The first occurred on New Years Day 2008 when a flight crashed into the sea off Sulawesi killing all on board. The second was in March when a flight burst into flames on landing killing 22 of the 140 on board. Even with this in mind we believe the risk of an aeroplane crashing is very low indeed. Firstly it is important to take into account the recent improvements in airline safety procedure. Since the New Years Day crash there has been an overhaul of procedures and enforcement and the Indonesian Government is confident that the EU restrictions will be lifted soon. The Indonesian Ministry of Transportation now rank all Indonesian airlines as achieving safety category 1 or 2. Category 1 and 2 airlines are generally considered safe by most governments including the British Government. It is also important to consider the frequency of serious incidents in comparison to the number of journeys made. Every week over one million people travel by plane in Indonesia, which means that the number of fatalities compared to the number of journeys made is very low.

## **6. Avian Flu**

Indonesia has the highest instance of avian flu of any county with over 90 fatalities to date. However there are only five recorded cases in South East Sulawesi. All occurred in 2006 and only one was fatal. The FCO advice states that 'The risks to humans from avian flu (commonly known as bird flu) are low, so there is no reason not to travel to affected countries.' All our kitchen staff are fully briefed in the safe practices involved in preparing food and avian flu is taken into account in this briefing. Staff and volunteers that are handling birds as part of their research are also briefed in safe handling practice. If avian flu were to mutate into a form that could be easily passed between humans then the risk would change. However, the current risk from avian flu to our volunteers and staff is very small.