Survivors Of Earthquake And Tsunami In Indonesia Are Desperate For Food, Water

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AILSA CHANG, HOST:

The situation in Indonesia's disaster-stricken Central Sulawesi province has grown dire. It's been four days since an earthquake and devastating tsunami struck the area. More than a million people are affected. The death toll has climbed to about 1,200, but it is expected to keep rising. There is little food or clean drinking water, and the devastation is slowing down the arrival of relief supplies.

NPR's Julie McCarthy is traveling with a military convoy carrying supplies from the south, and she joins us now. Hey, Julie.

JULIE MCCARTHY, BYLINE: Hi, Ailsa.

CHANG: So can you tell us where exactly are you heading?

MCCARTHY: We are trying to get to a town - a city, actually - a rather sizable city called Palu. We are about seven hours from there.

CHANG: Wow.

MCCARTHY: And we have been traveling since about, you know, 5 o'clock in the morning. It's a long trek. It's a treacherous trek. And as you mentioned, we are indeed - we're lucky enough actually to be in a convoy with the military at the moment, and they are bringing in food and rice and fish and noodles and mineral water and medicine. And there's medics on board. And there's blankets and cooking oil and diapers to deliver to people who are in just absolute dire straits. As you pointed out, there's...

CHANG: Yeah.

MCCARTHY: ...Looting taking place, and people are leaving as a result of the place kind of coming into a freefall.

CHANG: Wow.

MCCARTHY: Now adding to the misery, it's started to pour. Now there's torrential rains on top of earthquakes on top of tsunamis.

CHANG: And I'm curious, Julie. Looking at the convoy that you're traveling with, what kind of precautions are these members of the Indonesian army taking in case people do try to seize supplies forcefully?

MCCARTHY: Oh, certainly on this highway we are with what's known as the strategic commandos, and their whole brief is to secure this road. And they don't want to break up the team because they say they will be vulnerable to attack. They're afraid that bandits - you know, their prisoners were released from prisons when they burned them down or otherwise escaped during the earthquake. And there's fears that, you know, bandits and whatever inmates may have escaped will commandeer their rifles. And so their orders at any rate are to stay together. But the overall brief is to try to secure this place. Since we are now in day four - and you're really seeing a deteriorating situation rather than an improved situation. And why is that? Things have been very slow to ramp up.

CHANG: Are there other people traveling this highway besides military convoys?

MCCARTHY: Well, there are some individuals, yes, of course. There are people going up to the earthquake zone because thousands of people have not been able to have any contact with their families, and many people are unaccounted for. So there is a race to get up there. And the race now is against time because this is day four, and people will just - you know, the whole idea that people will survive after this long - well, the window is closing on them. And it's difficult to get on planes because the airports have been damaged.

CHANG: Right.

MCCARTHY: We hear that there was a huge ship that was due to have arrived at the port here. And whether or not anything's been offloaded is another question altogether. Things are moving extremely slowly. There's an invitation for international aid to come in, but it's very, very difficult to get in here.

CHANG: We've also been hearing reports that supplies are moving more to the city, less to rural areas. Are you hearing stories confirming that, that the supplies are being distributed quite unevenly?

MCCARTHY: Well, there's a lot of anger about that. The want is so huge, and the preparation for this is simply nowhere near what needs to happen here.

CHANG: That's NPR's Julie McCarthy. She's traveling in Indonesia's Central Sulawesi province. Thank you very much, Julie.

MCCARTHY: Thank you.