THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING FIRST

By Mikhail Tsyganov
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THE LARGEST KNOWN DISASTER EVER CAUSED BY A MUD VOLCANO

INDONESIA

Rush to judgement in E. Java mud disaster?

My latest trip to the E. Java mud volcano called Lusi turned out to be an adventure in contradictions. The largest known disaster ever caused by a mud volcano turned out to be a peaceful, steaming lake.

That is - if one forgets about the 19-meter deep mud closer to the main 50-meter wide crack leading straight into the abyss.

And then there are the four sunken villages and tens of thousands of refugees.

The nearby Porong River, so vigorously protected by organizations of various shades of green, turned out to be a narrow, muddy drain dug under the order of the former Dutch colonizers.

And finally, the scientist who was the first to cry *"wolf!"* was and is just that: a scientist who wanted to be the first. Wanted that too eagerly, it might seem; but let us begin from the beginning, geographically and chronologically.

The shortest distance between three truths...

For millions of years the huge Australian tectonic plate has been slowly crawling with its unimaginable weight over its lighter Asian neighbor, crushing huge masses of water-logged land into the deep.

At tens of kilometers depth the stone began to melt and turn into red-hot lava, which then headed upwards. That's how the island of Java came to be.

What happened to the water I'm afraid even to imagine. But part of it is still there, under our feet... And the other part has already found its way upstairs.

We shall start from a smaller island, Madura, lying to the north of Java, where amidst the small island's sun-scorched hills there lies the place locals call Bujel Tasek ('Navel of the Sea'). It is a mud volcano.

That is, a volcano that keeps on erupting not with molten rock (lava), but with a mixture of vapor and various gases.

After cooling and condensing on its way to the surface, this mixture turns into mud of varying degrees of density.

This is the geophysical truth, challenged by nobody. Now, if you draw a straight line from Bujel Tasek through a couple of smaller mud volcanoes born within days of the huge disaster mentioned earlier, then before reaching a curve of the Porong drain it would pass through Lusi. I.e., LUmpur ('mud") of SIdoarjo (the name of a nearby city) - the largest ever disaster caused by a mud volcano, located precisely on the same line with the other mud.

That line is a kind of a projection to the surface of the earth of the Watukosek tectonic fault that lies below.

On the way from Surabaya's airport to the office of P.T. Minarak Lapindo Jaya we heard local radio news about yet another fire at one of the numerous cracks in the earth oozing flammable gases.

A couple of hours later in the office of the company we were looking at photos and videos of Lusi's earlier stages, including those of the two smaller volcanoes that had erupted roughly on the same straight line.

And there came the news that moving soil had ruptured a nearby water pipe once again.

"One would think that any unprejudiced person could easily understand that all of this can be nothing else but a natural tectonic movement of the earth," -

says P.T. Minarak Lapindo Jaya representative Sunaryo Suradi. -

"But the media seems to ignore that". "We show photos of steel rails that were S-bent by the earth's movement, but nobody pays attention", he continued.

Why? Because a certain British geologist "strongly feels" that LUSI was caused by a gas well drilled by Lapindo. Not by nature.

Science according to show-business rules

Science has evolved in order to study the laws of nature. But now comes a new branch of "science", where people imagine they have a better way; a way in which science ignores both nature and its laws: a *"science"* which instead is ruled by a human creation – the laws of show-business. And according to these laws, what is important is that the British geologist, Dr. Richard Davies, was the first...

Over two years ago - on May 29, 2006 - at a distance of approximately 200 meters from a gas exploration well being drilled by Lapindo Brantas Inc. (Attention! Not from the well itself) and from a depth of 2,800 meters below the earth's surface, there burst forth a fountain of boiling mud.

Only minutes before the eruption there occurred one of several strong aftershocks of a powerful 6.3 magnitude earthquake that two days before had killed 6,200 people on Central Java and totally destroyed dozens of villages. Almost simultaneously, the nearby Mount Semeru volcano, the highest volcanic peak on Java, suddenly become even more active than usual.

Finally, almost immediately after the aftershock there was a sharp change in the pressure of the well being drilled

Yet, all of this evidence of massive tectonic activity is not important, believes Dr. Davies.

But who the hell is Dr. Davies? Richard Davies directs the Center for Research into Earth Energy Systems at Durham University in the UK and publishes his studies in the US. By using satellite photos he could within weeks of the eruption tell exactly what had happened three kilometers under the earth in another hemisphere more than three months before photos were taken - without ever having visited East Java or using data from the site.

We know that because his "study" published by the Geological Society of America, did not mention a single source related to Lusi (one can find references to two studies of Java's mud volcanoes but both of them were written many years before Lusi). In fact, except for satellite pictures taken a hundred days after Lusi, Dr. Davies had nothing.

And that's not all. During our meeting about a year ago Dr. Davies willingly acknowledged he has never even tried to ask Lapindo for data. "I agree that it would have been more reliable to have data from the well, but we were writing fast", he told me.

"Fast" is the key-word. Dr. Davies has made a lot of mistakes, but he was the first...

BUJEL TASEK MUD VOLCANO

And may now we hear from the scientists from France, Indonesia, Norway and Russia who insist that *"the available data supports the hypothesis that the initial activity ... was mainly triggered by the energy released by the 27th of May earthquake and not by the drilling"?*

May now Jim Mori, a US scientist working in Japan be heard when he insists that *"the mud volcano would still have happened without any drilling"?*

May now Osaka City University Professor Emeritus Hisao Kumai step forth with his paper *"Earthquake, the Major Trigger of Mud Volcanism at Sidoarjo, East Java"?*

"I believe that other scientists have mostly confirmed what we have said", - insisted Dr. Davies during our meeting. If facts say something exactly opposite.... well, who cares? Dr. Davies was the first. He has shaped public opinion, which by the laws of show business, is more important than the truth.

Concrete, mud, and information 'bubbles'

In May 2006 Lapindo drillers tried to stop the eruption that occurred in their neighborhood, but immediately new cracks started to form.

Mud discharges soon reached 130,000 cubic meters a day and totally covered four villages nearby and a part of a highway. People who lost their homes were moved to a huge market complex. Also damaged were gas and water pipelines, electricity lines and a main highway.

By August the mud had overflowed an urgently erected emergency five-meter tall dam and covered the neighboring railroad tracks.

In October pumps started pushing the mud into the Porong drain – (no, not *"river"* as claimed by environmentalists).

There were many efforts to stop the flow: drilling relief wells, dropping into the Big Hole chains of huge concrete balls, resorting to Javanese mystics.

Up to this moment a 'passive defense' with the help of tall dams containing the mud has been much more effective.

First the mud was encircled within a greater ring, and then a new, higher circle of dams was built around the Big Hole itself.

Still, at this moment, mud covers over 613 hectares, and since Lusi's beginning, about 38,000 refugees have been registered.

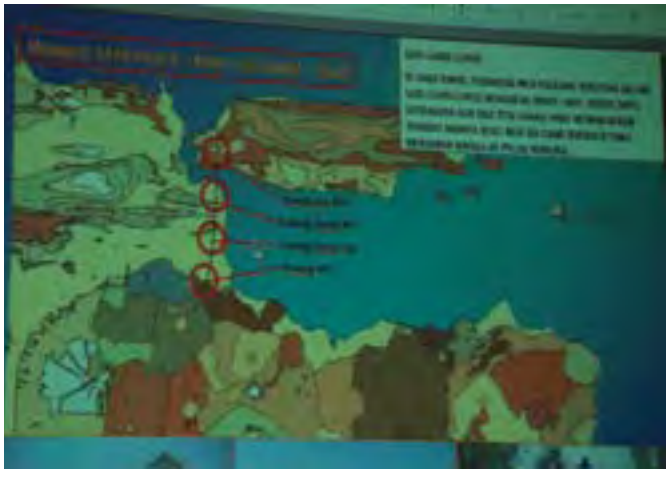
Dr. Davies is usually *"almost certain"*, sometimes *"more certain than ever"*, or in rare cases 90 percent and even 99 percent certain that drilling caused this disaster.

His argument? *"I feel quite strongly about this"*, - he told The Jakarta Post. But media which quote him are already 100% sure.

National Geographic News: *"Mud Volcano"* in Indonesia Caused by Gas Exploration, Study Says

AP: *"Scientists say Indonesian mud volcano caused by drilling, not natural disaster"*

Sorry, 'the study' and 'scientists' never said that. Dr. Davies is experienced enough not to forget to put 'most-probablies' or 'very-likelies' here and there... It seems I'm hopelessly out of fashion. When I was taught journalism it was a norm for any reporter writing about a scientific paper to read it in full. When I was taught in Moscow State University it was a standard procedure for anybody reading a scientific paper to look through its references first (in order to understand, whether it is worth reading at all). Anybody who has done that with Dr. Davies' study couldn't fail to notice that it was not using a single source on the main theme. During our meeting Dr. Davies, though, mentioned some *"confidential data from a source that can't be disclosed"*. I would have accepted such an explanation - from a journalist. But it seems that Dr. Davies calls himself a scientist...



Watukosek tectonic fault going from Bujel Tasek to Lusi

Where would YOU put a mathematician insisting that two by two equals 365 because he was told so by a confidential source?

A fat 'refugee' cat and a volcano in a cupboard

At the *"crowded market"* that served as a temporary refugee center (that consists, as it has turned out, of dozens of buildings), where The Jakarta Post had found at the end of May *"two thousand people"*, my count didn't exceed 20. People were definitely outnumbered by chickens and cats... Wow! One seldom meets such well-fed cats in Jakarta...

Some of those few remaining refugees were watching TV, some were playing with kids, some were collecting building materials that could still be used. But none of them confirmed the newspaper's report that they have *"refused to accept compensation from the company"*.

Somehow they were saying a totally different thing: *"We wait for the final settlement"*. Which is not an easy thing (according to Van Zorge consulting company, in Indonesia an estimated 75 percent of landowners do not have the requisite ownership papers).

Still, according to P.T. Minarak Lapindo Jaya, at this moment there are only 600.

Unlike the English saying about skeletons in one's closet, Richard Gunawan has quite a different problem with his cupboard. This resident of Sedati village, located about ten kilometers to the North of LUSI has a mud volcano there, small but quite real. On September 21, 2007 it erupted in his room, and continues to flow till this day, although by now it has calmed down some.

And Richard continues living in his house. His neighbors do the same, although I have personally seen at least four more houses with inbuilt mud volcanoes in the neighborhood.

They offered to show more, but I was quite satisfied to see the special drains for the mud running along the village.

By the way, THIS mud volcano is marked on a 1938 Dutch geological map so it definitely has nothing to with LUSI...or Lapindo.

You know, what's most interesting about this story? Gunawan bought his house for Rp 60 million (about $6,000). Two years before the volcano made him move his cupboard But now he wouldn't sell it for twice the price.

Why should he do it if - theoretically - there is still a chance to get a much better one instead?

"Two Mountains of Money"

This is how they call it at Lapindo, which, though proven guilty of nothing, has stepped in to foot the cost of relief efforts. And the photo above was taken in a new village that has already been partially built by P.T. Minarak Lapindo Jaya for refugees.

Here's the latest (June 30, 2008) data on Lapindo payments at the current USD exchange rate:

- All forms of compensation and help, including compensation for lost crops – $188,618,000
- Active defense (drilling relief wells, etc.) - $95,452,000
- Passive defense (dams, pumping mud, etc.) - $109,867,000

Why is the problem with some refugees not 100 percent settled then? YOU try bringing to a notary a person with no papers…

The truth, no matter how muddy, cannot be drowned in a sea of misinformation, no matter who was "first" with their version of the story.

After graduating in 1982 from Moscow State University's College of Afro-Asian Studies with degrees in Indonesian history and language Mikhail Tsyganov was and still is working for Russian leading news agencies and now is head of RIA Novosti's SEA Bureau in Jakarta, Indonesia. Can be reached at corjkt@cbn.net.id