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Public Communication Of The Indonesian Government In Handling Flash Flood Disaster In Sumatra

Selamat Ginting [1*]

[1*] *Lecturer at the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Nasional, Jakarta, Indonesia.*

a r t i c l e i n f o

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a b s t r a c t

This study aims to examine the public communication of the Indonesian Government in handling the flash flood disaster in Sumatra, at the end of 2025. The theory used in this study is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, with two assumptions, namely crisis response strategy, and crisis responsibility. The method used is a desk study, by tracing several keywords: government public communication; disaster management; flash flood; through searching Scopus Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis journals, print and electronic media coverage during the Sumatra flash flood disaster, from November 24, 2025 to January 15, 2026, impacts, losses, recovery, and especially the stages in the Indonesian Government's handling of the Sumatra flash flood disaster. The results of the study indicate that the current Prabowo Government does not yet have a measurable, integrated and planned disaster management procedure. This has resulted in inadequate Public Communication, especially in disaster management such as that which occurred in Sumatra. SCCT analysis shows that the Prabowo administration is employing a recovery strategy through apologies, although the exact compensation and corrective actions are unclear. In terms of public communication, the Prabowo administration is still considered slow, uncoordinated, and lacks specific guidelines, particularly for disaster management, particularly the flash floods in Sumatra.

a b s t r a k

Studi ini bertujuan untuk meneliti komunikasi publik Pemerintah Indonesia dalam menangani bencana banjir bandang di Sumatera pada akhir tahun 2025. Teori yang digunakan dalam studi ini adalah Teori Komunikasi Krisis Situasional (Situational Crisis Communication Theory/SCCT), yang dikembangkan oleh W. Timothy Coombs, dengan dua asumsi, yaitu strategi respons krisis, dan tanggung jawab krisis. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi pustaka, dengan menelusuri beberapa kata kunci: komunikasi publik pemerintah; manajemen bencana; banjir bandang; melalui pencarian jurnal Scopus Elsevier, Springer, Taylor & Francis, liputan media cetak dan elektronik selama bencana banjir bandang Sumatera, dari 24 November 2025 hingga 15 Januari 2026, dampak, kerugian, pemulihan, dan terutama tahapan dalam penanganan bencana banjir bandang Sumatera oleh Pemerintah Indonesia. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa Pemerintah Prabowo saat ini belum memiliki prosedur manajemen bencana yang terukur, terintegrasi, dan terencana. Hal ini mengakibatkan Komunikasi Publik yang tidak memadai, terutama dalam manajemen bencana seperti yang terjadi di Sumatera. Analisis SCCT menunjukkan bahwa pemerintahan Prabowo menerapkan strategi pemulihan melalui permintaan maaf, meskipun kompensasi dan tindakan korektif yang tepat masih belum jelas. Dari segi komunikasi publik, pemerintahan Prabowo masih dianggap lambat, tidak terkoordinasi, dan kurang memiliki pedoman khusus, terutama untuk manajemen bencana, khususnya banjir bandang di Sumatera.

Corresponding Author. Email: selamatgintin9@gmail.com [1].

1. Introduction

At the close of 2025, flash floods severely impacted Sumatra, continuing into December. As of December 29, 2025, the disaster resulted in 1,140 fatalities (Tempo.co, 2025). The flooding also caused extensive damage to infrastructure across the region. According to data from the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), more than 3,000 educational facilities, 215 health centers, and 806 houses of worship were destroyed. In addition, 97 bridges and 99 roads were rendered impassable (Tempo.co, 2025). Such widespread destruction demands an urgent, well-coordinated, and effective disaster response. Immediate actions needed from the Prabowo government include the complete evacuation of affected populations, provision of adequate food and shelter, and the restoration of both temporary and permanent housing, as well as the rehabilitation of vital infrastructure, including schools. On a global scale, disaster risk reduction mechanisms such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, introduced by the United Nations, offer key strategies for managing disaster risk. This framework establishes seven global targets, underpinned by four strategic priorities: improving disaster risk understanding, strengthening governance for effective risk management, increasing investment in disaster risk reduction to enhance resilience, and bolstering preparedness to ensure a rapid and effective emergency response.

Furthermore, the framework emphasizes the principle of "Building Back Better," which is integral to recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction efforts following disasters (UNDRR, 2015). In developed countries, such as the United States, disaster management systems are well-established. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), created through the Presidential Reorganization Plan of 1978, plays a pivotal role in coordinating federal assistance during emergencies that exceed the capacity of state and local governments (Gonzalez, 2010). FEMA's core responsibilities include providing immediate field assistance, deploying technical and operational expertise, and facilitating the allocation of financial resources for reconstruction. The agency also supports long-term recovery efforts, including infrastructure rebuilding and offering low-interest loan programs to individuals affected by disasters. FEMA's comprehensive approach is built on preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation, with the goal of minimizing future disaster risks and ensuring that recovery efforts are efficient and sustainable (Gonzalez, 2010). In contrast, Indonesia currently lacks standardized frameworks for emergency disaster management. The flash floods at the end of 2025 have sparked debates over whether the disaster should be classified as a National Disaster. The severe loss of life, infrastructure, and property has led many to call for such a designation (Antaranews.com, 2025; Detik.com, 2026). However, the government's reluctance to declare the disaster a National Disaster has been met with criticism, as many argue that the government has not acted decisively enough given the extent of the damage, which spanned across three provinces (Mediaindonesia.com, 2025).

Figure 1. Flash Floods in Sumatra

Figures 1 show that the flash floods that struck Sumatra Island were devastating, causing extensive damage, as previously described. The process of addressing flash floods in Sumatra requires comprehensive coordination and public communication from both the central and regional governments. This paper will discuss the Indonesian government's public communication in responding to flash floods in Sumatra.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a desk study methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Samatan, 2018), also known as a library research approach, to examine government public communication in the context of disaster management. The research is conducted in the following stages:

1) Keyword Search
   The first stage involves conducting a comprehensive search using key terms such as "government public communication," "disaster management," and "flash floods." This search is performed across academic databases, including Scopus, Elsevier, Springer, and Taylor & Francis journals.
2) Media Coverage Review
   The second stage involves reviewing mass and electronic media coverage of the Sumatra flash flood disaster, spanning from November 24, 2025, to January 15, 2026. This includes an analysis of the disaster's impact, the resulting losses, recovery efforts, and, in particular, the stages involved in the Indonesian Government's response.
3) Examination of Public Communication
   The final stage focuses on analyzing the public communication efforts of the Indonesian Government, with particular attention given to statements and actions by President Prabowo Subianto regarding the government's decisions in handling the flash floods in Sumatra.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Flash Floods in Sumatra

The flash floods that struck Sumatra in late 2025 caused significant damage across three provinces: Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra. Media reports indicate that the financial losses in North Sumatra alone were estimated at IDR 18.48 trillion (Detiksumut, 2026). These losses were spread across various sectors, with the road and bridge infrastructure of North Sumatra suffering damages totaling IDR 880.65 billion. National roads and bridges incurred a loss of IDR 814.26 billion, while the agricultural sector saw a loss of IDR 1.48 trillion and plantations sustained damages of IDR 535.01 billion. Additional losses in the livestock and fisheries sectors were valued at IDR 152.87 billion and IDR 305.6 billion, respectively. The housing sector also experienced substantial damage, with losses amounting to IDR 2.78 trillion, while micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) suffered losses of IDR 4.48 trillion. District and city road infrastructure losses were estimated at IDR 940.55 billion, and losses in irrigation systems, dams, and rivers were valued at IDR 912.46 billion. Damage to educational facilities reached IDR 550.6 billion, while health facilities suffered a loss of IDR 361.83 billion. Places of worship were affected by losses of IDR 219.5 billion, and damage to markets, banking sectors, and government offices amounted to IDR 3.1 trillion, bringing the total losses in North Sumatra to IDR 18.48 trillion. In Aceh, losses as of December 2025 were estimated at IDR 20.7 trillion (TheAtjehnese, 2025). These estimates, based on the BNPB's Post-Disaster Needs Assessment (PDNA), highlight the extensive damage across several sectors:

1) Damage to Residential Areas
   A total of 27,496 homes were damaged, with 728 swept away, 11,236 severely damaged, 4,991 moderately damaged, and 10,617 lightly damaged.
2) Public Facilities and Infrastructure
   Damage to public facilities, including health centers, schools, irrigation systems, bridges, national roads, and government offices, was estimated at IDR 9.2 trillion, based on damage patterns from previous Aceh disasters.
3) Economic and Productivity Losses
   The economic impacts, including the loss of agricultural land, the collapse of small businesses, and the cessation of economic activities in 12 districts, amounted to an estimated IDR 6.1 trillion. This figure could increase if the paralysis of the economic sector extends beyond 14 days.
4) Environmental Damage
   Environmental destruction, including the loss of watershed forests, erosion, and sedimentation in rivers, was estimated to range between IDR 1 trillion and IDR 5 trillion.

In total, the national losses resulting from the flash floods in Aceh and Sumatra are estimated to reach

IDR 68.67 trillion (Liputan6.com, 2025). As of December 25, 2025, the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) reported 1,135 fatalities due to the floods and landslides in Aceh, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra (Berita Satu, 2025; Tempo.co, 2025). Additionally, 173 people were reported missing, and the number of displaced persons reached 489,864, spread across various refugee locations. In Aceh, 503 people died, 31 went missing, and 466,667 people were displaced. North Sumatra recorded 371 deaths, with 70 people missing and 13,262 displaced. West Sumatra reported 261 deaths, 62 missing, and 9,935 displaced persons (Berita Satu, 2025). Despite the widespread damage, the Prabowo Subianto administration chose not to declare the Sumatra flash floods a National Disaster, effectively preventing foreign aid from entering the region. This decision sparked strong criticism from academics, activists, and the public, particularly regarding the restriction of international support (Tribunnews.com, 2026). The government's stance remained firm, despite the mounting pressure to escalate the status of the disaster from a regional to a national level (Tribunnews.com, 2025).

Indonesian Government Public Communication on Flash Floods in Sumatra

The flash floods in Sumatra, which began in late September 2025, caused significant losses across Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra. Reports from various media outlets have highlighted the Indonesian government's communication strategies regarding the disaster, including its handling of the disaster's status, response efforts, and recovery plans. Public communication during the disaster, primarily carried out through the National Disaster Management Agency (BNPB), was largely led by President Prabowo Subianto. However, there is no separate agency in Indonesia responsible exclusively for disaster communication, which contrasts with countries like the United States, where the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) coordinates disaster response efforts. FEMA's role includes structured disaster communication through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), ensuring a comprehensive approach to disaster management (Bates, 2023). In Indonesia, disaster management is entrusted to BNPB, which operates as a non-governmental agency under Law No. 24 of 2007. The agency's responsibilities include providing disaster management guidelines, coordinating response efforts, and communicating disaster-related information to the public (BNPB, 2008). Despite the government's efforts, the handling of the flash floods in Sumatra has been criticized for its lack of coordination and delayed response. The failure to classify the disaster as a National Disaster led to public dissatisfaction, with many questioning the adequacy of the government's disaster communication strategy. This criticism was amplified by statements from President Prabowo Subianto, who visited Sumatra several times but did not escalate the status of the disaster (Ntvnews, 2026). Additionally, the government's response was seen as lacking empathy, as it failed to provide clear compensation or address the long-term needs of affected communities (BBC News Indonesia, 2025; Suara.com, 2025). The Indonesian government's approach to disaster communication, particularly during the Sumatra flash floods, mirrors the recovery strategy outlined in Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). SCCT suggests that in crisis situations, a government must take responsibility, issue apologies, and offer corrective actions (Coombs, 1995). In this case, the government's apology, articulated by the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture, Pratikno, was seen as insufficient due to the absence of clear compensation or transparent reforms (NTBSatu.com, 2025; Finnews, 2025). The approach taken by the Prabowo administration contrasts with the practices of FEMA, which provides a more proactive, coordinated, and transparent response to disasters. The comparison highlights the need for Indonesia to develop a more structured and empathetic disaster management communication system, particularly one that integrates various institutions and ensures efficient coordination during large-scale crises.

Discussion

The flash flood disaster in Sumatra at the end of 2025 highlights the significant challenges in disaster management in Indonesia, particularly regarding public communication and inter-agency coordination. Despite the high number of casualties and the extensive material losses, the Indonesian government, under President Prabowo Subianto, decided not to

declare the disaster a National Disaster, thus preventing foreign aid from entering the region. This decision sparked widespread criticism from academics and activists, who saw it as a move that slowed disaster response and limited the effectiveness of international assistance (Tribunnews.com, 2026). Research by Kondolele et al. (2025) and Jamalullail et al. (2023) emphasizes the critical role of coordinated and consistent public communication in the successful implementation of government policies. In this context, poor or fragmented communication can lead to policy failure and erode public trust, as demonstrated by the handling of the Sumatra disaster. Moreover, the government's communication during the handling of the Sumatra floods was criticized for being slow and uncoordinated. Most official statements were made directly by President Prabowo Subianto, with no specialized agency handling disaster communication centrally, which contrasts with the structure used by FEMA in the United States. FEMA has a clear system in place for disaster response coordination, managing communication in a systematic and coordinated manner, which has proven effective in addressing large-scale disasters (Bates, 2023). In Indonesia, the BNPB, which is responsible for disaster management, often faces challenges in implementing effective communication, as highlighted by Herman's (2021) research. Herman found that inconsistent communication during the COVID-19 pandemic weakened public discipline and awareness. A similar situation occurred with the Sumatra floods, where inconsistent communication from the government created confusion and exacerbated the disaster's impact. Using *Situational Crisis Communication Theory* (SCCT) developed by W. Timothy Coombs (1995), the communication strategy employed by the Indonesian government during the disaster appears to follow a recovery approach, primarily through apologies from government officials, but without clear corrective actions or compensation for the affected communities. Coombs (1995) argues that in crises where an organization or government is clearly responsible, recovery strategies like apologies and corrective actions are crucial to restoring public trust. However, in the case of the Sumatra floods, despite the apology issued by the Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Culture, Pratikno (NTBSatu.com, 2025), there were no concrete measures taken to ensure reforms in the disaster management system. This shows that while there were attempts to address the crisis, those efforts were insufficient to meet public expectations for long-term transparency and accountability, as discussed in the research by Coombs and Halladay (2002) regarding the importance of transparent reform in crisis management. In comparison, the FEMA model used by the United States offers a prime example of how a dedicated, coordinated agency can respond more effectively to disasters. FEMA not only focuses on emergency response but also implements disaster mitigation and long-term recovery measures that reduce future disaster risks (Gonzalez, 2010). Therefore, to improve disaster handling in Indonesia, particularly in terms of public communication and inter-agency coordination, a more structured and coordinated model, similar to FEMA's, needs to be adapted and implemented more effectively.

4. Conclusion

The flash floods that struck the island of Sumatra at the end of 2025, affecting three provinces Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, North Sumatra, and West Sumatra resulted in extensive losses, including lives, property, and infrastructure, with total damages amounting to trillions of rupiah. Public dissatisfaction with the government's response to the disaster stems from the slow pace of disaster management, the absence of a clear and unified command structure for decision-making, and fragmented public communications. Furthermore, there was a lack of empathy among some officials, and the communications from the Prabowo administration were not effectively coordinated within a single agency, which contributed to confusion and hindered the disaster response efforts. These issues highlight the urgent need for a more efficient, centralized, and empathetic approach to disaster management and communication in the future.

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