

Indonesian disaster hits region's biggest red-light district

Most people in this bustling East Java city are in bed by midnight, getting much-needed rest before another day at work.

But not in the city's Dolly district, where things only begin to get going at night. Loud music blares from small karaoke bars along the main street, where scantily clad young hostesses and male customers belt out traditional Indonesian songs or dance to the music.

But Dolly is not just an entertainment zone. It's one of the largest red-light districts in Southeast Asia, with more than 2,000 sex workers in hundreds of brothel houses in the heart of Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city.

Dolly is named after the district's first brothel madame, a Dutch woman from Indonesia's colonial period. Its prominence rose with the growth of Surabaya's shipping port, one of the country's largest.

Dolly's fame, or infamy, has spread far and wide, with the district being the first thing some foreigner's think of when Surabaya is mentioned. The brothel houses are called 'aquariums' because the front door is a giant glass window that allows customers to scope out the working girls, ranging from 18 to 50 years old, sitting inside.

One brothel called Wisma Ratu Kembar, or House of Twin Queens, doubles as a boarding house for 27 sex workers and because of an industrial accident in East Java that has affected business the sex workers are increasingly apprehensive about their future.

The accident occurred on May 27, 2006 when an Indonesian gas exploration company apparently hit a mud volcano while drilling in Sidoarjo, an East Java industrial town that lies 25 km from Surabaya.

The drilling well is now a crater, spewing an out-of-control mudflow that has displaced more than 12,000 people, inundated six sq km of homes, businesses and factories, wreaking havoc on the province's economy.

'It has been unbelievably quiet for us these past months after the mud disaster hit,' Eva Sasmito, 26, a sex worker in Dolly for almost two years said.

'I used to get up to eight clients a night, but now even one per night is considered good, maybe a maximum three,' Eva, sitting in her tiny, air-conditioned room, said with a sad smile.

She said she has had to reduce her daily expenses because she still must send some of her income home each month to her parents in Central Java province, who do not know she is a prostitute.

'Luckily, I don't have to pay for rent, electricity, or food in this brothel house because our madame pays for all that,' Eva said.

The mudflow has forced the main toll road between Sidoarjo and Surabaya to close on dozens of occasions as earth dams protecting the highway have burst. When the toll road is open there are huge traffic jams, and as a result, commerce, businessmen and even sex tourists often cannot get

to the city.

'The ongoing mud disaster has indeed put a burden on East Java's economy, including sex workers,' Soeharjo, a spokesman for the provincial government, said. 'Even hotels and restaurants have asked for tax relief from us. The damage done to our business and economy has reached more than \$400 million.'

In Jarak, an area within Dolly where older sex workers ply their trade, the pain is felt harder. During good times, they compete with younger sex workers, but after the mud disaster, now there are virtually no clients for them.

'I lost 80 percent of my clients,' Sugianti, 30, said, adding that she may leave the brothel if the this situation continues, because she must send money each month to her mother and five-year-old son who live in northern Indonesia.

The economic downturn has also affected local pedicab drivers, restaurants, shop owners, and many others who make a living on the fringes of Dolly.

'I miss the old days when life was not so difficult, before we had this mud disaster,' said Warso, 67, a pedicab driver.

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