

## New capital city of Indonesia



## Decades of flooding prompts 'new' Jakarta move

Jakarta, for the time being still the capital city of Indonesia, is polluted, overcrowded and sinking, due to the ever-worsening floods, writes Hong Kong-based economist Gary Lai in an article in City Monitor.

A \$35bn plan, which is predicted to have massive multi-faceted impact on surrounding territories such as Sabah and Sarawak, should be completed by 2024. It will relocate the capital city to Nusantara (an Old Javanese term meaning "outer islands"), 1,300km away in the East Kalimantan province of Borneo. The project is getting a renewed push after slow-down brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic since 2019.

The founders of Jakarta did not imagine the city this way. From its early existence since Indonesia's independence in 1949, it was meant to be a modern, financial hub and an engine in the country's push into the international economy. Locals and visitors are reminded of this every day as they pass by the Welcome

Statue in the Hotel Indonesia roundabout.

Daily commuters to Jakarta have reached one million people. Economic losses from traffic jams range from \$4.5bn to \$7bn (about RM20-35 billion). Jakarta is an example of a sick city, in need of drastic measures. The new capital, on the other hand, aspires to be a model of human co-existence with the environment.

Many alternate sites were considered, including Palangkaraya and several ones on Java Island. Marked at the geographic centre of Indonesia and linking the North Penajam Paser and Kutai Kartanegara Regencies, Nusantara hopes to be a "Forest City" – a "new high-tech, smart city, surrounded by forest".

This poses challenges in a country of contradictions, many of which are environment-related. Indonesia has the world's fourth-largest population, although 9.7% are living in poverty. The price tag for relocation is expected to be

exorbitant; a 99km stretch of road running along Nusantara alone is estimated to cost \$767m.

Its people, furthermore, are voraciously depleting its natural resources and destroying the remaining safeguards against extreme climate events. Although Indonesia is a founding member of the F-11 coalition of forested countries, its domestic companies regularly cut down trees to fuel economic growth, leaving others the task of monitoring the depletion of this great carbon sink.

The design for the new capital, entitled "Forest Archipelago", will feature green space tagged by an array of landmark plazas and connected by a smart mass-transit network. But the carbon footprint of clearing the forest for construction will be great – for example, experts calculated that 48 million tonnes of carbon dioxide will be released into the atmosphere.

Ironically, despite its huge archipelago, Indonesia often

needs to think and plan like a small island country as rising sea level threatens its coasts. The urgency of Jakarta's struggle can be best felt by this factoid: the city has been sinking 25cm annually in certain areas.

What is the culprit of Jakarta's troubles? Most would say flooding. In 2019, 40% of the city was below sea level. Amsterdam, by contrast, is one-third below sea level. Patrick Daly and Paolo Testolini, architects at London-based Woods Bagot, called it the "region's most vulnerable city to climate disasters such as flooding". A study by the government predicted that the Soekarno-Hatta International Airport may one day be permanently flooded.

Why Jakarta floods? It's said that underneath the city are underground aquifers that store the abundant rainwater seeping through the ground. To the north of the city is a district through which numerous canals have been built and are subsequently flooded by water that cannot flow into the aquifers. Ill-advised land development that favoured "hardscaping" over natural vegetation exacerbated this trend.

The city has only one-third of the optimal amount of green space for naturally draining heavy rainfall. Kota, the ground-zero of this process of abuse, is sinking at "three-to-four inches per year" and is already being de-populated backwater as water tries to flow into the Java Sea.