Unfinished business: Indonesia’s new capital has long way to go

AFP- It was supposed to be the jewel in the crown of the 10-year presidency of Joko Widodo, but Indonesia’s capital-to-be, carved out of dense jungle in Borneo, is a vast building site just weeks before being due to open.

Bar the centrepiece presidential palace – winged like the national emblem, the mythical Garuda bird – Nusantara is a series of unfinished buildings and bumpy access tracks, shrouded by clouds of dust kicked up by trucks and excavators.

The new capital was expected to be inaugurated on August 17, Indonesia’s Independence Day, but building delays, funding woes – and even the unwillingness of those expected to relocate there – have cast doubt on its opening.

“Everything is still in progress,” Widodo conceded during a visit to the site this week.

“This is a job of 10, 15 or 20 years. Not just one, two or three years.”

The city-in-progress will still figure large in independence celebrations, but an official decree moving the capital from Jakarta could be delayed until long after Widodo’s successor, Prabowo Subianto, takes charge on October 20.

Widodo resurrected a long-shelved plan to relocate the capital soon after taking office in 2019 after experts warned Jakarta – the megacity of 12 million people – was sinking.

Borneo island’s east coast was chosen as the new site of a capital called Nusantara – centrally located to better serve Indonesia’s more than 17,500 islands.

The plan called for the city to be built in five stages by 2045, but phase one – a government core intended for the president, his ministers, and key civil servants – was due to be up and running by now.

– 'No crisis' –

AFP was given rare access to phase one by project officials, but found claims that it was 80 percent complete hard to accept.

"We are on track. There is no crisis, as you can see," Danis Sumadilaga, Nusantara's head of infrastructure, told AFP during a recent visit.

"But… this is the first stage of a long-term development. This is not for today. This is for our next generation."

Another official close to the project told AFP on condition of anonymity that the first phase was nearer 20 percent complete.

Instead of a shiny new urban centre, a legion of workers toiled around hollow tower blocks, protecting their faces from the dust while being pushed to meet the August 17 deadline.

"For Independence Day, we are indeed pressured to finish the target," said concrete plant manager Jamaluddin, 47, who goes by one name.

"The weather has been extreme. It's very difficult if the weather is rainy," said Nisya Khairunnisa, a 37-year-old concrete worker from Aceh.

Heads have already rolled because of the lag, with the leader and deputy of the new city's administration resigning in June.

On top of delays, Nusantara has failed to attract crucial foreign investment.

Jakarta will fund 20 percent of Nusantara and wants 100

trillion rupiah ($6.13 billion) in private investment by the end of 2024.

But as of June, it had received only 51.3 trillion – all from domestic backers.

Experts say foreign firms are likely hesitant to commit to a city in one of the world's largest stretches of rainforest, home to orangutans and long-nosed monkeys.

"They don't want to invest in something at the cost of biodiversity," said Aida Greenbury, an Indonesian expert on sustainability.

"It's mission impossible," said Nicky Fahrizal from Jakarta's Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

"The state finances are not capable of building a mega-structure in only one or two years."

– Reluctant to move –

The state of the project has done little to entice more than 10,000 civil servants ordered to relocate to Nusantara from September.

Those who spoke to AFP -– all on condition of anonymity -– do not want to move.

"It is clear the facilities are not adequate," said a government worker in his early 30s.

"They say it will truly become a city in 2045. But we have to move there in 2024. What will our lives be like?"

Even the offer of special allowances and moving costs is doing little to change minds.

"I am still very reluctant to move," a 32-year-old civil servant told AFP.

But the government is banking on the loyalty and sacrifices of its workforce.

“Whoever comes in will be the pioneers,” said Sofian Sibarani, the city’s designer.

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