

Floods devastate central Vietnam

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In early December torrential rain blowing in from the east across the China Sea dumped up to two metres of water in some areas of Vietnam in just five days. The resultant floods came only one month after what had been the worst flooding in the country this century. At the beginning of November, flash floods killed 592 people and caused an estimated \$US250 million in damages.

The latest floods affected seven of Vietnam's central provinces, home to over 7.5 million people. At least 115 people have been confirmed dead with 12 people missing. More than 400,000 homes were destroyed or damaged, displacing an estimated one million people. Thousands of schools and health clinics were wrecked and hundreds of kilometres of roads swept away.

The rising waters destroyed thousands of acres of newly planted rice paddies as well as severely affecting large areas of secondary crops including sugar cane and coffee. Thousands of head of cattle, pigs and other valuable livestock have been lost, along with 3,000 shrimp and fish ponds and over 1,200 fishing boats.

In some places, paddy fields were covered with more than a metre of sand and mud, while in other cases the soil has been completely washed away. Essential irrigation networks and dykes have also been destroyed. Officials have reported that crops replanted after last month's floods have been washed away and many temporary relief shelters destroyed.

Military helicopters dropped emergency supplies of food to thousands of flood victims in seven parts of Quang Ngai, one of the two hardest hit provinces. Quang Nam, another badly affected province, had some 150,000 people in need of emergency food. Phan Ky Chuong, a provincial administrator from Quang Ngai explained: "The situation is very critical from now to next March, when the next crop is expected".

The government sent 5,000 troops along some relief supplies to assist in the worst affected areas. At the

height of the floods the government was concerned that rising water levels in the Phu Ninh reservoir would threaten the Long Son dam in Quang Nam province. Soldiers sandbagged the dam and evacuated thousands of people downstream to higher ground.

While the flooding may have been worse than usual, these areas are prone to floods each year. As Bui Thi Hoa, 27, explained to a reporter: "Every year the floods come. What can we do? We have no choice but to bear it?" Carrying his four-year-old son on his shoulders, he was one of the villagers from Duy Xuyen district who had to wade through knee deep water to collect packages of food and drinking water.

The impact of the flooding in these areas has been compounded by a number of man-made factors. Central Vietnam is the country's poorest region. The region was devastated during the Vietnam War by the bombing, shelling and use of chemicals by the US military and its allies. Most of Vietnam's essential industry and agriculture is located further to the south.

In the province of Quang Tri, which saw some of the most intense fighting during the Vietnam War, the World Bank has estimated that more than 65 percent of the population are either living on or below the poverty line. Many people are suffering from deformities and other side effects caused by the widespread use of chemical defoliants by the US military.

A severe shortage of arable land is a continuing problem. On the coast, the sandy soil is infertile and unsuitable for many crops. These areas are also plagued with frequent storms and droughts. Areas inland are more suitable for agriculture but are inaccessible due to landmines and unexploded ordinance. This dilemma has driven thousands of lowlanders into the hills where the land is not as good as on the valley floors and plains. The tilling of this hillside land leads to greater soil erosion and degradation.

The province was so heavily bombed, shelled and mined that many of the original inhabitants fled to the relative safety of Laos. When they returned after the fighting they were confronted by a barren landscape still suffering impact of chemicals like Agent Orange. During the latest floods, tens of thousands of trees replanted to try to revive the vegetation were washed away.

Trung Si Thien, the chairman of the Dong Ha People's Committee, a lifelong resident of Quang Tri province said: "The US dropped seven tonnes of bombs here for every man, woman and child. During the war only three of a total of 970 villages remained unscathed, one out of five people died.

"As a result we have a shortage of labour, we have a high proportion of disabled people and single mothers, and nearly 7,000 of our children have been deformed by American chemicals. Our losses were enormous and our problems remain severe."

Lack of land, shortages of labour and lack of government services means that starvation confronts one in five households and children suffer a malnutrition rate in excess of 50 percent. People continue to be killed and injured by landmines and unexploded ordinance.

Some government assistance has been provided to the worst affected areas. But the Stalinist regime in Hanoi will do little to overcome the legacy of economic backwardness and poverty affecting millions of people let alone implement measures to mitigate the repeated flooding. For the last decade, Vietnam's limited funds have been directed to opening up the country to foreign investors and exploiting business opportunities which have benefitted the upper echelons of the bureaucracy not the vast majority of workers and rural poor.



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