

Devastating floods leave millions homeless across Indochina

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30 September 2000

The flooding of the Mekong River in recent weeks has inundated large areas of Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and destroyed the homes or possessions of an estimated four and a half million people. As of early last week, at least 278 people had died in the floods, over 100 of these in Vietnam. Many were children, who were unable to swim and were caught in the rising waters. Thousands of homeless families are living on the top of dangerously saturated dykes or in water-logged thatched huts with little food and no safe drinking water.

The International Red Cross estimates that the number of people directly affected at 1.2 million in Thailand, 200,000 in Laos, 1.6 million in Cambodia and 1.5 million in Vietnam. Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai said that 85 percent of the crop in the country's main northeastern rice growing region has been affected by the flooding. A fortnight ago, 800,000 square kilometres of land were under water across the region.

In Cambodia, the capital of Phnom Penh, a city of one million people, is holding out against the rising waters of the Mekong and Bassac Rivers with a series of sandbagged levies. The worst affected are peasants living in the poorest areas of the region. Cambodia has appealed for help for 600,000 people in what the government describes as the worst flooding in 70 years.

As well as the loss of homes, livestock and crops much of the limited infrastructure of the region has been washed away. The Vietnamese government stated that the flooding has damaged 8,639 schools, 175 hospitals and clinics and seriously damaged 6,412 kilometers of road and 576 bridges in the provinces of Long An, Dong Thap, An Giang, Kien Giang and Can Tho.

In the An Phu district of An Giang province, 32,500

of the 34,000 homes in the area are under water and authorities reported that water levels were still climbing as of last week. In this district the Mekong was rising at the rate of one to four centimetres per day and on September 23 had reached a level of 5.05 metres, its highest since 1961. In Cambodia the river had risen up to 15 centimetres per day. Meteorologists predict that the river will not return to normal levels until late November or early December.

In Vietnam soldiers sent to repair damaged infrastructure have had to concentrate on rescuing people trapped by the flooding. Authorities fear the spread of disease due to the lack of safe drinking water and poor sanitation. Combined with a shortage of food and medicine these conditions create the potential for epidemics of cholera, malaria, dengue fever and diarrhoea. Thai public health authorities have already reported an outbreak of leptospirosis—a disease caused by bacteria contained in rat urine. At least 224 people have died but these fatalities are not included in the flood figures.

The scale of the disaster has overwhelmed the resources of authorities in the region, and as in the case of the Mozambique floods earlier in the year, the amount of aid provided by the governments of the major powers has been pitiful.

According to figures provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Britain has donated \$US1.46 million—a little over 30 cents a person—in response to an appeal by the International Red Cross. This tiny amount appears decidedly generous, when compared to others—Japan and Australia have given \$50,000 and \$310,000 respectively. The US administration has donated a mere \$25,000.

The major powers bear a heavy responsibility for the

region's economic backwardness and lack of infrastructure—including for flood prevention. During the 1960s and 1970s, the US with the active involvement of Australia and the backing of Europe and Japan spent tens of billions of dollars on its war to prop up client regimes and wreaked havoc across large areas of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. After 1975, the US compounded the wartime devastation by imposing an economic blockade on Vietnam. Many areas of Indochina have not recovered from the effects of the saturation bombing and the widespread use of defoliants and napalm, and have now been hit by the flooding.

The immediate cause of the flooding is put down to heavy rainfalls earlier in the year in the upper reaches of the Mekong River system. Recent unusually heavy storms, more of which are predicted, added to the already high water levels. Meteorologists have warned that high tides in the South China Sea at the end of September may prevent the floodwaters from draining and further prolong the crisis.

However, heavy monsoonal rains and the melting of mountain snows are an annual event throughout much of the Asian region. The impact of these natural occurrences and the effects of flooding have been exacerbated by a number of man-made factors.

Large-scale deforestation and uncoordinated agricultural activity has affected the ability of the region to absorb unusually heavy rains. According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the forest cover in most countries has been reduced from 70 percent of the total land area in 1945 to 25 percent by 1995.

ESCAP cites other causes for the growing number of flood disasters across Asia, including the reduction in river channels and drainage systems, the reclamation of floodplains and wetlands, and the rapid expansion of urban areas. Floods in 1998 in Bangladesh, China, India and Vietnam caused the deaths of 7,000 people, \$US23 billion in infrastructure damage and destroyed 25 million hectares of crops.

As a solution to the problem ESCAP promotes the idea of “regional cooperation in flood control and management” and the setting of “realistic targets” such as the provision of “infrastructure for 100 percent protection of residential areas by 2010.” No one could disagree with ESCAP's rather modest proposals. But it

begs the question as to why so little has been done to date.

A comprehensive flood plan for the Mekong River in Indochina require billions of dollars and the cooperation of all the governments in the respective regions. Neither has proven possible.

For the first half of the 20th century France, the regional colonial power, did little to control the flooding. Following World War II, first France and then the US waged a protracted brutal war to prop up their client governments in the region making any plans impossible. After 1975, Indochina remained an arena of Cold War rivalry and intrigue.

With the opening up of Indochina as a source of cheap labour in the 1990s, governments have engaged in frantic competition to attract foreign investment and have diverted scarce resources to provide for transport and telecommunications infrastructure demanded by transnational corporations. Plans for the Mekong River are a perennial topic of discussion—little, however, has been done.

As the minuscule amounts of international relief demonstrate, the major powers are not prepared to provide more than nominal financial assistance for the needs—including for flood prevention measures—of workers, small farmers and the urban and rural poor.



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