

Flood tragedy in Thailand linked to deforestation

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At least 176 people are dead and more than 450,000 homeless or in hardship following the severe flooding that engulfed northern Thailand after Typhoon Usagi swept through the area on last month. Thousands of homes have been damaged across 33 provinces and more than 200,000 hectares of farmland have been submerged.

The worst affected area has been the Lom Sak district in the mountainous north-central province of Phetchabun. Massive mudslides tore down the mountainside in the early hours of August 11, uprooting vegetation and burying seven villages under two metres of water and mud. At least 120 people died and over 1,000 people made homeless.

The mudslides were caused by the deforestation of the Phetchabun mountain range, which has transformed the area into a barren wasteland. The villagers residing in the valleys had no warning of the coming catastrophe. The rainfall in the lower areas had not been abnormal and they had no way of knowing of the torrential rains higher up.

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has accused the Thai authorities of ignoring recommendations made after similar flash floods and mudslides killed 317 people in 1988. At that time, calls were made for the installation of flood warning systems and action to reverse the deforestation. ESCAP executive secretary Kim Hak-Su declared on August 17: "It appears that the recommended measures for prevention of such hazards have gone unheeded."

Sombat Yumuang, a geologist at the University of Chulalongkorn, told a seminar on August 27 that at least 1,000 Thai villages were at risk from mudslides, compared to an official government estimate of just 200.

Following the latest tragedy, the Thai government has promised to install early warning systems and help people in the most dangerous areas to relocate to safer ground. It has put forward no plans, however, to force timber companies to reforest the stripped areas and made no mention of the ongoing logging activities.

Although a logging ban was imposed in Thailand after the 1988 flooding, it continues to take place unhindered just over the border in Burma, Cambodia and Laos. The logs are transported back over the border into Thailand with the knowledge of the local authorities and the military. The region's forests of mahogany and teak are highly prized.

The United Nations Environment Program states in its latest report: "In the process of deforestation, two-thirds of wildlife habitats have been destroyed, and vast expanses of naturally fragile land, particularly upper water catchment areas, have been exposed to soil erosion." Water that was once caught by the forests now flows unhindered in the river systems below.

Massive logging in the west and east of Cambodia is also being blamed for severe flooding. For the second year in a row the Mekong River has risen to record heights, flooding 10 of Cambodia's 24 provinces. Over 560,000 people had been forced to leave their homes and at least 35 people had been confirmed drowned. Some 160,000 hectares of ricefields have been lost. The Cambodian government has made an appeal for international aid, on the grounds that more than 130,000 people are in urgent need of food supplies.

On August 29, the government used water cannon and riot police to disperse hundreds of desperate flood victims who had established tents near the royal palace in the capital Phnom Penh, after hearing rumours King Norodom Sihanouk was distributing food. One elderly man told the Associated Press: "We don't care if the

authorities chase us away. We have nothing. We have no choice.” At least four people were injured by the police attack.

Opposition politician Sam Rainsy accused the Cambodian government of “ecological crimes” in an August 30 column in the *Bangkok Post*. He alleged that half of Cambodia’s forests had been logged out in the last seven years by timber operations that involve the Cambodian military.

Prime Minister Hun Sen has blamed logging operations for the collapse of two major bridges linking Phnom Penh with the eastern provinces, alleging that overweight trucks had been driven across the structures. He has threatened to cancel contracts and hinted that new anti-logging legislation will be introduced into parliament in October.

The flooding of the Mekong is also wreaking havoc downstream in Vietnam. Over the past two weeks, water has inundated over 26,000 houses, 10 hospitals and 106 schools in the Mekong Delta. Tens of thousands have been forced to evacuate the area. Four weeks ago, Typhoon Usagi destroyed 5,800 buildings and ruined millions of dollars of crops.

According to officials, the water level as the Mekong crosses the Cambodian-Vietnam border is higher than last year, when flooding caused severe damage and claimed 407 lives. So far this year, 23 people have drowned, including 10 children lost while they were searching for food and firewood.



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