

Vietnam's Mekong delta suffers third year of flooding

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For the third year in a row, flooding has inundated large tracts of countryside in Vietnam's Mekong River delta. Six provinces have been affected and 221 people have drowned or died in mudslides. At least 181 of the victims have been children. Last year, in the worst floods recorded since 1961, 480 people lost their lives.

Although cyclical floods have always afflicted the Mekong delta, their severity and frequency has been aggravated by the lingering effects of bombing and defoliation carried out by the United States during the Vietnam War and by deforestation during the 1990s in the upper reaches of the river, particularly in Cambodia.

The floodwater level on October 7 of a Mekong tributary, the Tien River, recorded at 4.32 metres, 0.38 metres above what is classified as Alarm Level III—a very dangerous flood. The level of another tributary, the Hau River, was recorded at 4.32 metres (0.82 metres above alarm level III) at the Chau Doc Gauging Station.

Already, damage to roads, agriculture and fisheries in the poverty-stricken and backward region is estimated at \$US45 million. Some 2,162 houses have been destroyed and another 10,722 damaged. In a devastating blow to the delta's social infrastructure, at least 44 health clinics and 1,405 schools have been damaged. According to the Vietnamese government's national anti-flood committee, a total of 1,260,000 people have been affected in some way.

The floods have swamped 40,000 hectares of agricultural land. Farmers had been able to harvest up to 95 percent of their summer-autumn crop before the inundation. However, given that it will take nearly two months before the floodwaters completely recede, farmers in many areas will not be able to grow the traditional third rice crop, which is used mainly for domestic consumption.

Over 20,000 families are believed to still be trapped by the floods. Another 22,800 families have been evacuated and have been camped out for weeks in makeshift shelters on exposed and often crumbling dykes. With little food and no safe drinking water, their plight is perilous. Dr Le Nhat Thanh from a UNICEF medical clinic told western journalists: "We are seeing many children who are suffering from diarrhea and acute respiratory infections."

According to a disaster official, at least 47,900 families, or nearly 240,000 people, are facing food shortages in the Mekong delta. Jason Rush, UNICEF emergency team member, told the press: "Many of these families are already running out of food and many more are relying on dirty flood water for their daily needs, which pose an especially acute risk to children's health."

According to UNICEF officials most of the evacuated children from the flooded commune of Phu To were living on a meager diet of rice and soup. Many families have told relief workers they were borrowing from money-lenders at high interest rates in order to purchase food and other essentials.

Vietnam's Red Cross has launched an appeal for \$923,000 to buy food, canvas, fishing nets and rescue equipment, but the government of Vietnam has not made any appeal for international assistance. Reflecting the complacency and disinterest within the political establishment, one official from the Tan Chau district told *Agence France Presse*: "We do not fear starvation because of the spirits between the people." The Hanoi regime's primary concern over recent months has been securing a trade pact with the United States, in order to lower US tariffs and facilitate opening Vietnam up as a competitive cheap labour platform for textiles and other industries.

Belatedly, authorities have been established 500 day-care centres in three flood-affected provinces for parents to leave their children when they go out to seek work and launched a campaign to teach basic safety techniques. Most of the children who have drowned are the children of poor, itinerant farm labourers.

The international response to the crisis in the Mekong delta has been equally complacent. The world media has barely reported the scope of the flooding. Several governments have given token donations, none more than \$US25,000, while the international Red Cross and Red Crescent have announced that they have no plan to launch an international appeal for Vietnam's flood victims. UNICEF is raising \$279,400 to help the victims over the coming three to six months.

Most glaringly, there has been no discussion internationally on providing the necessary financial aid to assist reforestation programs or flood defence measures in the region. It is simply accepted as a *fait accompli* that the millions who live along the Mekong will suffer time and again from preventable flooding.



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