

# Thousands flee flooding in Thailand

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The government of Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has declared public holidays from today until October 31 in Bangkok and 20 provinces as flood waters engulf entire areas of the Thai capital and test the last flood defences protecting its inner districts.

The government's efforts to drain the flood waters around the city through its western and eastern outskirts have failed. On Tuesday, Bangkok's deputy governor Pornthep Techapaiboon estimated that some 4,000 million cubic metres of water was cascading toward the city from the area around Ayutthaya, 80 kilometres to the north. "The problem is City Hall can drain no more than 400 million cubic metres of water a day," he admitted.

The public holidays are meant to enable some of the city's 12 million residents to evacuate and allow others to prepare last-ditch sandbag defences of their properties. Bus stations were crowded yesterday with people trying to leave. Food and bottled water were in short supply. Rationing has been introduced by some supermarkets.

Bangkok's main domestic airport at Don Muang, which has been operating as an evacuation centre and flood relief headquarters, was closed on Tuesday as water lapped at its two runways.

The evacuees at the airport, like those in other centres, are being forced to move for a second time as the situation deteriorates. In the flooded areas, there are now 113,000 people in shelters and 720,000 seeking medical assistance. There have been 373 fatalities since the heavy monsoon rains began in July.

Early today, high tides were approaching in the Gulf of Thailand that will force water up the city's river system. The director of Rangsit University's Centre on Climate Change and Disaster, Seri Supharatid, said the city now was dependent on river dykes holding. He warned: "In the worst case scenario, if all the dykes break, all parts of Bangkok would be more or less

flooded."

On Tuesday, Bangkok governor Sukhumbhand Paribatra appeared on television to advise all residents along the Chao Phraya River, which sprawls through the capital, to be on "full alert." The river had already reached a record water level of 2.3 metres on Monday and he warned that at the present rate it would reach 2.6 metres by the weekend. The average flood embankment is 2.5 metres high.

Sukhumbhand told the media: "After assessing all indicators, we found the situation is getting serious and we expect it to get worse. I have said if the situation becomes a crisis, I'll be the first one to tell you. Now I'm telling you."

Three northern districts of the capital have been under water since last Saturday. Water is already moving through the Sathorn and Silom areas, where major hotels and foreign embassies are located. On Wednesday, the notorious Bang Kwang Central Prison was shut down and prisoners evacuated.

Yingluck has conceded that there is a 50 percent chance that inner Bangkok will be severely inundated. She said flooded areas could remain under water for at least one month. The Education Ministry has delayed the beginning of the new school semester until November 15 in Bangkok and 11 other provinces, affecting hundreds of thousands of children.

Seven major industrial zones have been closed down and the labour ministry has estimated that 650,000 workers were laid off.

The government has offered 25 billion baht (\$US820 million) to the owners of the seven industrial estates to get production up and running 45 days after the waters recede. The Thai Chamber of Commerce warned on Wednesday that foreign investor confidence would be damaged unless the government could protect Bangkok from floods. Currently, the cost of the disaster is being put at 500 billion baht. Some economists are predicting

that economic growth for 2011 will collapse to just 2 percent, compared with 8 percent for 2010.

The Finance Ministry warned on Monday that a loss of confidence in the country's stability as a manufacturing centre could be permanent unless long-term problems were addressed. It has a 420 billion-baht plan to defend strategic areas from flooding, while other regions—undoubtedly the residential suburbs of the urban poor—would essentially be abandoned to their fate.

The floods are already impacting on the supply chains of transnational companies. Computer hard-drive production has slumped, affecting computer assembly internationally. Kyoichi Tanada, the head of Toyota's Thai operation, stated today that overtime work had been suspended at Toyota plants in Japan and parts of South East Asia due to a lack of components from Thai-based factories. Honda has closed down its Malaysian plant.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* noted that companies that have poured billions of dollars into Thailand to exploit its cheap labour and relatively good infrastructure are now re-thinking their strategies. "Thailand's worsening disaster is reviving a debate over whether some companies are pushing lean supply chains too far for short-term efficiency at the cost of long term security," the article stated.

It is an indictment of the entire capitalist system that billions of dollars have financed development designed only for quick profits, while basic needs such as flood mitigation and planning have been ignored. The result is a human and economic disaster on a massive scale.



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