

Thailand: Hundreds dead as floods threaten Bangkok

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More than 260 people have been killed by flooding in Thailand since mid-July, and an estimated 2.34 million people have been affected in at least 30 of the country's 77 provinces.

Now the floods, which have mainly hit the northeast, the north and the centre of Thailand, are threatening to engulf Bangkok. The city is particularly vulnerable, because many areas sit less than 2 metres above sea level. Already, pockets of the city have been submerged, with 17 locations flooded over the weekend as a result of heavy rainfall. Flood levels of 30-40 centimetres were reported at one location in the city.

The National Disaster Warning Centre warned that nine canals in the capital, already near capacity levels, were likely to break their banks, while 13 districts and eastern zones outside flood barriers were likely to be flooded.

High tides beginning this week could exacerbate the flooding, with fears that the Chao Phraya River, which runs through central Bangkok, will break its banks. Authorities are installing up to 400 water pumps along the river and digging canals to divert flood waters.

Over the weekend, there were chaotic scenes and frantic evacuations in the ancient city of Ayutthaya, 80 kilometres upriver from Bangkok. The inner city island, where historical sites are located, was inundated after the water broke through the flood walls in many areas. Among those evacuated were some 2,000 patients from the provincial hospital.

Residents and rescuers waded through waist- and chest-high water, hopping on trucks and boats, and moving to higher ground with whatever few belongings they could extricate. Journalist Simon Roughneen, reporting from Ayutthaya, wrote: "All day, groups of people have been

clambering onboard dinghies, rafts and impromptu vessels cobbled together from truck tyre tubes, styrofoam boards—anything at all that floats.

"Back outside the city's hospital, Thai Red Cross volunteer Pipath Cheangnoi says he was asked by government officials to help co-ordinate the evacuation of more than 2,000 patients trapped inside the building—an effort that was ongoing as darkness fell amid dangerous conditions with electricity down or unusable, and strong currents swirling in places around the hospital gates."

Roughneen spoke to one relieved mother whose 5-year-old daughter had just been saved by rescuers who pushed through chest-high water to reach her after she was trapped upstairs by an overnight rush of water. "I was scared, worried. I still am, but thanks to these helpers I have my Sililak safe," Thanarat 'Yui' Panomai said.

The government has discussed possible evacuation measures for Bangkok, but with flood waters bearing down on the city of over 12 million, it is a case of too little, too late. Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra told the media: "We are rushing to drain water and evacuate people before the seawater peaks. We don't know how much rain will fall when the new storms arrive. We can't protect every area."

The floods have also destroyed infrastructure, and paralysed economic life in parts of the country. More than 200 roads have been damaged, including the Asian highway, the main route to northern Thailand. The gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast for this year has been scaled down from 4.4 percent to 3.6 percent as a result.

Almost 200 factories, including a Honda plant and electronics and car parts facilities, were closed in Ayutthaya, after the Rojana industrial park was inundated. "It's a crisis there now," Industry Minister Wannarat

Charnnukul told *Bloomberg.com* on Saturday. “There is nothing we can do because the water level is higher than the barriers.”

There are fears that the floods, which extend across South East Asia, will further drive up food prices. The Thai farm ministry announced last week that the main rice harvest would be down 12 percent, with over 3 million tonnes possibly damaged by the floods. Thailand is the world’s biggest rice exporter, accounting for around 30 percent of exports.

The floods threaten a political crisis for the Puea Thai-led coalition government, which was elected in July following a populist campaign that fraudulently appealed to the aspirations of the rural and urban poor.

In a nationally televised address on October 7, Prime Minister Yingluck said: “We have to admit that this is more serious than in the past... The government is just a little more than a month old and it is difficult to cope with the situation because the volume of water is so high.” Earlier, Yingluck commented that the government was at its “wits end” because of the flooding.

Since taking office, the government has been under pressure from business circles in Thailand and internationally to drop its election promises. Business associations are using the floods to demand that the government drop its pledge to raise the minimum wage. Employer representative Atthayuth Leeyavanija, a member of Thailand’s central wage-setting committee, warned against implementing a promised pay rise, saying: “Raising wages to 300 baht a day nationwide would have a severe impact on businesses.”

Whilst the floods are a natural phenomenon, their devastating impact has been exacerbated by long-term government policies that have subordinated public safety to the profits of loggers and property developers.

National Disaster Warning Centre director Captain Somsak Khaosuwan has publicly stated that the severity of the floods was a product of poor logistics and rampant deforestation. The *Bangkok Post* quoted him saying: “It used to be villagers had four to five days to prepare, but nowadays flooding can hit the same day as the warning... There are no forests to absorb the water.”

Somsak said natural water reservoirs that prevented flooding in the past no longer existed due to building and property development: “The way we build our roads and urban areas, we don’t consider the natural flow of water. Often we build things directly in its path. Many villages are built right in the path of the water.” He added: “There are people who believed that their villages would not be flooded because they have never been flooded from the days of their parents and grandparents... But things have changed.”

The flood crisis has exacerbated social tensions, with the *Bangkok Post* reporting violent clashes between residents in wet areas, angry at those living in dry areas. There was a confrontation between farmers and villagers in Ayutthaya province last Friday, with both sides firing shots into the air.

Other countries in the region have also been affected by monsoonal rain and tropical storms. More than 170 people have been killed by flooding in Cambodia since early August. Some 230,000 families have been affected by the floods, and another 23,000 evacuated.

At least 15 people, including nine children, have died in flooding since late September in Vietnam’s central and southern provinces. Dozens of houses had been swept away in the Mekong Delta and 27,700 more were under water, according to the state-run *VnExpress*.

Two weeks ago, the Philippines were struck by Nalgae and Nesat, which claimed more than 100 lives.

Flooding in Henan, Sichuan and Shaanxi provinces in China late last month affected some 12.3 million people, killing 17 people, and destroying more than 120,000 houses. The flooding in Shaanxi was reported to be the worst in 50 years.



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