

Millions impacted as floods engulf Bangkok

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After three months of record monsoonal rains in Thailand, Bangkok's 12 million people are being hit by the flood waters that have engulfed one third of the country. Over 350 people have already lost their lives and thousands of homes, farms and businesses have been inundated.

An estimated nine million people in Thailand's rural north, north east and central plains, as well as the cultural and industrial city of Ayutthaya, 80 kilometres north of Bangkok, have so far been affected. Major industries have been forced to close and an estimated seven million tonnes of rice has been destroyed. Current estimates put the damage bill at 120 billion baht (\$US3.9 billion) but this is likely to be an underestimate.

The effects of the monsoon rains have been exacerbated by deforestation, development projects that have interfered with natural water courses, and non-existent or inadequate flood mitigation measures. The heavy runoff from the flooded northern regions now hitting Bangkok is being compounded by high tides in the nearby Gulf of Thailand.

Bangkok sits astride the Chao Phraya River flood plain and on average is less than two metres above sea level. City areas currently threatened account for about 20 percent of the capital's population and over 40 percent of its total land area.

There was an element of panic in government circles when it became obvious that, despite earlier official assurances, Bangkok would not be spared. The government has clearly been unprepared for the extent of the flooding.

In an attempt to answer criticism over the inadequate response, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra issued a disaster warning for Bangkok last Friday. She invoked the 2007 Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act to coordinate efforts to move the water through the capital. The city's sluice gates are being opened and ten major canals being used to channel the floods to the sea.

This "controlled flooding" is a high-risk tactic with potentially catastrophic social consequences. Drainage

canals were already full to the brim last Friday and water continued to rise in areas where the gates had been opened. On Saturday the run-off burst through the flood barrier in the Bangkok Yai district.

The rising floods have produced open conflict between the Yingluck government and Sukhumbhand Paribatra, the Bangkok governor and head of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration.

Sukhumbhand is a member of the Democrat Party that dominates the parliamentary opposition to Yingluck's Puea Thai party. Yingluck's invocation of the 2007 law allowed her government's Flood Relief Operations Command to override Sukhumbhand's reluctance to open all the sluice gates.

The government is sacrificing parts of the city to allow the floods to run off. On October 19, Information and Communication Technology Minister Anudith Nakornthap said the government had to save the centre of Bangkok because it was heavily populated and contained important economic areas. Its protection, he claimed, would help speed up reconstruction in other parts of the city.

Seven districts in eastern Bangkok, where many of the capital's industrial workers and the poor live, are being flooded. The city's western outskirts are also being used as drainage routes. Residents of five of Thailand's central plains districts, including those in Bangkok, have been warned to move to higher ground and brace for more flooding.

Late yesterday, Sukhumbhand made a dramatic television appearance, warning residents that "all indications point to only one conclusion: a critical problem will happen." He said five more areas of the city would be inundated, including the Chatuchak market districts and the Don Muang area, where Bangkok's former international airport is being used as a flood-relief centre and where some of 113,000 displaced residents have been evacuated.

Sukhumbhand's broadcast was at odds with reassurances issued earlier yesterday by the Flood Relief

Operations Centre (FROC), which claimed the situation was under control and could be expected to improve. An hour after Sukhumbhand's broadcast, however, FROC chief Pracha Promnok, who is Thailand's justice minister, appeared on television to read a brief statement saying FROC would "support" the city's relief efforts.

The volumes of water hitting Bangkok are well beyond current drainage capacities. Last week, Thailand's Irrigation Department announced that floodwaters from Ayutthaya and Pathum Thani were flowing at the rate of 120 million cubic metres per second toward eastern Bangkok and 100 million cubic metres per second to western Bangkok. Over 470 million cubic metres per second were moving through the Raphiphat canal from flooded fields to the Rangsit Praoonsak canal north of Bangkok.

The Chao Phraya River can drain less than 200 million cubic metres a day, with diversion routes in eastern and western Bangkok only capable of moving about 86 million cubic metres per day.

The deepening tensions within Thailand's ruling elite have produced differences over whether to declare a state of emergency, which would give the military extraordinary powers. Yingluck's "disaster warning" was an alternative to an emergency decree.

The Democrat Party's call for an emergency declaration has been opposed by sections of the ruling Puea Thai Party and its backers in the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, or "Red Shirts".

Aligned with exiled former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra—Yingluck's brother—Puea Thai and its predecessor parties were victims of the 2006 military coup that ousted Thaksin, and a brutal military crackdown in 2010.

The military has responded nervously to calls for a state of emergency. According to the *Bangkok Post* on October 21, an army source said the military chiefs would "not welcome" an emergency decree because they did not want to be held responsible if Bangkok could not be protected. "The military does not want to be a scapegoat," he told the newspaper.

The infighting in ruling circles has caused fear among residents, confronted by conflicting information from the government and city administrations over how to respond, whether the central city areas would be flooded and how long the capital would remain inundated. Bangkok residents have been left to fend for themselves, with panic buying, major traffic jams and other incidents worsening the disaster.

A poll published last Thursday revealed that 87 percent of those interviewed did not trust FROC or the government because of poor or contradictory information about the crisis.

The local and international financial media are weighing up the economic costs as major industries, including auto and electronics manufacturers, are hard hit. Tens of thousands of workers have been laid off.

US-owned Western Digital, the world's largest manufacturer of hard-disk drives (HDD), with 60 percent of its production based in Thailand, has had to suspend its operations. There is speculation that HDD prices will skyrocket. The company expects to ship just 26 million HDDs in the next quarter, compared to 58 million in the previous three months.

According to *Bloomberg*, Sony Corporation is considering an alternative base for its hi-tech camera production after the floods damaged its Thai plant. A company spokesman said she did not know when production would resume.

Toyota, Nissan, and Honda are losing 6,000 units of auto production each day at an estimated \$500 million monthly loss. Honda is the worst hit. In 2010, it produced 170,000 units in Thailand, including the Accord and Civic. Its plant is now closed. Auto parts suppliers in Thailand have also been inundated and forced to close.

Business leaders have seized on the floods to demand an offensive against the working class. Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) chairman Payungsak Chartsutipol called for a 25 percent wage cut and the peak manufacturing body demanded that the government postpone its election promise to increase the minimum daily wage to 300 baht (\$10). Last Saturday, Thailand Development Research Institute president Nippon Poapongsakorn declared: "It's time for the government to rethink its populist policies and give top priority to salvaging the country's economy."



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