Floods in Southeast Asia lead to over 130 deaths

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26 November 2025

More than 100 people have been killed in Southeast Asia during a week and a half of intense rains throughout the region. Most of the destruction has taken place in Vietnam and Thailand, though Malaysia has also been affected.

At least 98 people have been killed in Vietnam as of Wednesday, while another 10 remain missing, since heavy rains began on November 16. An 800-kilometer stretch in the central region of the country has been the most heavily affected, with rainfall last week exceeding 1,900 millimeters in some areas. This is approximately equal to the average rainfall for the entire year.

The worst-hit province is Dak Lak where 63 people have been killed. Many of the roads have been blocked, with rescue personnel dropping supplies to stranded survivors from helicopters. Shops and homes have been destroyed or are under mud. Damage to the region, including crops, is estimated at $US545 million. At least 186,000 homes have been damaged and 3.2 million livestock and poultry have been killed. “We’ve never experienced that much rain and such bad flooding,” 45-year-old Pham Thu Huyen, a resident of Khanh Hoa Province, told the media.

Rivers in the country surged to record-highs or near record-highs. The Ba River in Dak Lak Province surpassed its 1993 historic peak by 1.07 meters, while the Cai River in Khanh Hoa Province also reached a new high, according to Vietnam’s National Center for Hydrometeorological Forecasting.

Vietnam is one of the world’s most flood-prone countries and has been particularly hard-hit this year, with major storms striking the country in September and October. This includes Typhoon Kalmeagi, which tore through the region in early November, striking the same central region of Vietnam, killing five.

At the end of October, parts of Vietnam’s central region also experienced heavy rainfall, including 1,739mm of rain in a 24-hour period, the second-highest amount on record globally. This also led to widespread flooding and the deaths of 50 people. From January through October alone, at least 279 people have been killed in floods and landslides throughout the country.

More rain is expected at the end of this week as Typhoon Koto, the 15th storm to form in the South China Sea, approaches Vietnam. While its path is currently unpredictable, heavy rains in the central region are expected from November 28 to 30.

While natural disasters like intense rains and typhoons cannot be prevented, they can be planned for. Yet under capitalism, the drive for profits takes priority over all else, including the safety and well-being of a population living in a flood-prone region.

Following its embrace of pro-capitalist reforms in 1986 under its *Doi Moi* program, the Stalinist regime in Hanoi carried out widespread construction with little regard for the impact on the environment. According to Kyoto University’s Center for Southeast Asian Studies, by 1996 Vietnam’s four major urban districts had lost nearly two-thirds of water bodies, which are important for managing floods.

Furthermore, Vietnam’s system of 7,300 reservoirs and dams throughout the country are outdated and poorly run, making flood management difficult and more dangerous. Many of these reservoirs and dams were built decades ago.

According to the Department of Hydraulic Works Construction Management, only 19 percent of reservoirs have specialized monitoring equipment while just 30 percent have emergency plans in place. Just 9 percent are certified for safety. Flood warnings often rely on phone calls or sending official memos. All of

this creates delays, which can lead to deaths when people are caught unawares.

On top of this, many of the reservoirs are operated individually rather than as part of a single, planned system. Operational procedures are also based on outdated information, without taking into account the new conditions that have developed as a result of climate change. This means flood planning, including the discharge of water, may be carried out without consideration for broader conditions. Uncontrolled spillways are also particularly vulnerable.

Environmental scientists have also pointed to the role of climate change in increasing the intensity of storms and their impact. “Climate change is already shaping Vietnam’s exposure in several important ways,” Nguyen Phuong Loan, a climate scientist at the University of New South Wales, stated in October. “That means a higher chance of flash floods, especially in densely populated urban areas,” she said.

Seas in the region have increased in temperature by almost one degree Celsius since the preindustrial era. As the atmosphere also warms, this increases the amount of moisture it can hold. According to NASA, for every degree Celsius that the atmospheric temperature rises, the amount of water vapor in the air increases by 7 percent. This leads to more intense rainfalls becoming more common.

The latest rains have also impacted neighboring countries including Thailand. While large sections of the country have been impacted, flash floods hit nine of Thailand’s southern provinces, severely affecting 2.78 million people. Hundreds of thousands of homes have been flooded. The city of Hat Yai in Songkhla Province, where the government has declared a state of emergency, experienced 335mm of rain in a 24-hour period last Friday, the highest rainfall in 300 years.

At least 33 people have been killed in Thailand so far, as well as one person in Malaysia, which has also been hit by floods. The Thai government has come under fire from survivors, who accused officials of inaction. They have pointed out that the government issued unclear evacuation notices and location of shelters.

Siripong Angkasakulkiat, a spokesman for the government, responded by callously shifting blame onto the victims, claiming, “Evacuation alerts were issued, but residents in several communities refused to relocate to temporary shelters.”

As in Vietnam, poor disaster management is rampant in Thailand, where floods are also common. The Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), a Bangkok-based think tank, wrote in an article published in January: “Thailand’s flood problems stem from three main issues: centralized policies with poor coordination on the ground, outdated early warning systems, and insufficient funding with misplaced priorities.”

TDRI explained that flood forecasts are typically only 33 percent accurate a day in advance due to poor weather monitoring equipment, while the SMS alert system is underdeveloped, meaning many residents do not receive warnings in time. While TDRI does not draw the conclusion, this mismanagement and lack of resources, as in Vietnam, is the result of prioritizing profit over social needs under capitalism.