



NTS ALERT

TYPHOON XANGSANE'S TRAIL

Typhoon Xangsane (Laotian for elephant) was a Category 3 storm on the five-level Saffir-Simpson scale when it hit the Philippines on 29th September, but gained energy thus making it a Category 4 as it moved westward towards Vietnam, packing maximum sustained winds of 213 kilometers per hour (132 miles per hour). Fortunately, it subsided to category 2 upon reaching Vietnam on 1st October, carrying winds of 154-177 kph (96-110 mph).

According to a report by the National Disaster Coordinating Council, typhoon Xangsane had destroyed 9,104 homes in the Philippines, knocking down power lines across the main island of Luzon and causing 365.4 million pesos (26.7 million U.S. dollars) in damages to infrastructure and agriculture. Commonly known as Milenyo in the Philippines, the typhoon had caused a death toll of at least 161 while at least another 72 remain missing. This has said to be the worst storm to hit Metro Manila in a decade.

More than 90,000 people remained unable to return to their homes due to continued flooding and threats of landslides from hills that had been saturated by heavy rains.

While none of the country's power plants had been damaged by the storm, millions of Filipinos were without electricity due to fallen lines that had been knocked down by hundreds of trees, electrical posts and billboards during the storm. According to National

Transmission Corporation vice-president Jesusito Sulit, the task of repairing the fallen lines is immense and remains uncertain how long it would take to restore all of them, even with military assistance.

Millions remained without power in Luzon. On the Bicol peninsula at Luzon's southernmost tip, which bore the brunt of the storm, only about five percent of electrical service had returned, he said.

Schools and financial markets were shut for two days after the storm, which had maximum winds of 130 kilometers (81 miles) per hour.

In Vietnam's resort city of Danang, about 1 million took the brunt of Typhoon Xangsane's heavy rains and fierce winds as it hit land at about 9am on Sunday. Nearly a thousand houses along the coast had their roofs blown off or damaged. Although the storm was centered on Danang, it also hit the nearby historical towns of Hue to the north and Hoi An to its south.

Typhoon Xangsane also un-roofed or destroyed more than 8,000 houses, and caused severe damages to many transportation works, hydropower plants and farming areas, according to an earlier report by the National Steering Committee for Flood and Storm Prevention and Control

State media has quoted the death toll to be 16. In Nghe

Nature's Wrath

In this edition:-

Nature's Wrath

- ❖ Typhoon Xangsane's Trail
- ❖ Vietnam's Preparation Paid Off
- ❖ Hot Mud Masking Java
- ❖ Pakistan's Predicament
- ❖ Hazy Days

Is Democracy Dead?

- ❖ To Coup or Not to Coup
- ❖ East Timor: Sacrificing Justice for "Big Brother's" Democracy"
- ❖ Bangladesh's Bitter Protests



An province, four people died of high water caused by heavy rain accompanied the typhoon when they went fishing on rivers in Thanh Chuong district, prompting local authorities to warn people against reaching rivers and streams.

As of 2 p.m (local time) on October 1, the Da Nang General Hospital has given treatment to 130 injured people, most of them were struck by the failing down of walls and trees. The figure has been on the constant rise. Danang officials said about 100 boats have been rescued by ships from Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong and China.

Xangsane is the 18th storm of this year's Pacific cyclone season.

Sources

- ABS-CBN Interactive, 30 Sept 2006
- Thanh Nien Daily, 1 Oct, 2 Oct 2006
- Xinhua Online, 30 Sept 2006
- Nhan Dan, 2 Oct 2006
- Channelnews Asia, 2 Oct, 3 Oct 2006

Vietnam's Preparation Paid Off

Despite the destruction caused by Xangsane, Vietnamese authorities are pleased as their evacuation exercise had prevented much greater destruction from taking place. Learning from past typhoon experiences, a total of some 200,000 people in four central Vietnamese provinces had been evacuated and brought to safe shelters. This is said to be the biggest such Vietnamese operation in 30 years.

Vietnamese authorities worked tirelessly to avoid a repeat of the devastation wrought by Typhoon Chanchu in May, which left 267 people dead or missing -- a toll blamed on the failure of the storm response system. In 1988, Danang suffered a similar devastating storm. Though the intensity of the storm and winds were milder, the damage was far more, killing 94 people.

30,000 people in Quang Nam province were evacuated. In the province's Hoi An town alone,

Hot Mud Masking Java

When it seemed as if the worse was over after the tsunami in Aceh in 2004, who would have expected another natural disaster; more so one that has been induced by man himself. Four months ago, a torrent of hot mud from deep beneath the surface of Indonesia's Java island began surging from a natural gas exploration site following a drilling accident.

The "mud volcano" pours out some 165,000 cubic yards of mud every day - enough to cover a football field about 75 feet deep. Often spewing out in geyser-like eruptions, the mud has left some 665 acres swamped or abandoned as unsafe, forcing more than 10,000 people from their homes. The house of the residents of Sidoarjo are chest-deep in mud, along with their rice paddies and the factories where they work

The hot mud has had several health implications. Not only has the hot mud resulted in burns and poor sanitation, the emission of hydrogen sulphide has caused infection to the respiratory systems. Hundreds of Indonesian have been hospitalized, particularly the young and old who have complained of nausea, diahorrea, burns and breathing problems.

The mud is believed to come from a reservoir 3.5 miles below the surface that has been pressurized by shifts in the crust or by the accumulation of hydrocarbon gases. Geologists say the mud volcano is one of the largest ever recorded on land. They are also weary that the appropriate technology may not exist to stop the eruption, saying mud could flow for years or even centuries - or stop on its own at any time.

There has been much resentment towards the government's handling of the situation. In a show of protest, Greenpeace activists have dumped a truck-load of mud outside the welfare ministry and called on Welfare Minister Aburizal Bakrie to take more responsibility for the situation in East Java. Mr Bakrie's family is linked to the company whose gas exploration work was initially blamed for causing the problem.

Continued on next page

Dams have been built to contain the mudflow but have been breached several times. The government has thus planned to dump the mud into the sea. This has again, raised opposition from environmentalists as endangering marine life. In addition to this, it could potentially affect food security by contaminating the fish in the sea.

Even so, the Indonesia government see it as a “good solution among the worst choices” available at the moment. The main priority now is to prevent the mud from submerging an even wider area.

Sources

Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 13 July 2006

Associated Press, 2 Oct 2006

BBC News, 27 Sept 2006

15,000 residents were evacuated. The town has set aside VND300 million (US\$18,750) for food, medicine, and blankets for evacuees. In this heritage town, measures were deployed to reinforce 49 historical houses against the storm after 17 others collapsed partly from the high winds and rain.

Over 1,000 fishing vessels in the province were also safely anchored. Nearly 500 international tourists were moved from six hotels and resorts along the Hoi An coast to safer places. Vietnam Airlines grounded all domestic flights while international flights were re-routed around the storm. The national railway suspended its north-south train service

In Danang city, 11,000 people living along the shore and in makeshift houses were moved to shelters. Another 6,700 are set for evacuation.

The police and military also joined in the efforts. The defense ministry prepared thousands of soldiers are ready to deploy.

In Quang Ngai province, at least 50 international experts working in the Dung Quoc Industrial Zone were moved to safety. The province had spent VND3 billion (\$187,500) on evacuation efforts.

Quang Tri province however reported problems with many residents refusing to leave. It has only succeeded in evacuating 4,260 households of over 15,100.

The National Committee for Search and Rescue on Saturday allotted nearly 25,000 lifebuoys and 700 tents to central provinces.

Source

Thanh Nien Daily, 1 Oct 2006

Channelnewsasia, 1 Oct 2006

Pakistan’s Predicament

A year on from the massive earthquake in Pakistan that killed 79,000 people, life has yet to return to normal. 2 million survivors of the earthquake, which measured 7.6 on the Richter scale, are still living in temporary shelters, without proper sanitation facilities and sufficient supplies of food and water. Such living conditions are far from adequate to brace the upcoming winter.

If that isn’t enough, a new fear plagues the quake survivors – landslides. While seasonal landslides are a common threat in northern Pakistan, last October’s earthquake has made the terrain more susceptible to rains and tremors. Consequently, this year’s landslides are more widespread and frequent.

Questions have been raised to what extent the large amounts of international aid for relief action has actually gone to the victims. Relief agencies have noted a lack of funding in carrying out the various relief operations. This, they say, is due to government pressures to end relief operations and move toward recovery and rehabilitation. As a result, helicopter capacity has been greatly reduced, leaving the cheaper option of land travel, which itself can prove inefficient as ongoing landslides render relief agencies and area residents stranded.

Moreover, the process of recovery and reconstruction has its own set of problems. Many victims still complain that they have not been given compensation or the amount given isn’t adequate in meeting the costs of compulsory new quake resistant house designs. Other families are to be moved to proposed satellite towns as they live near fault lines or roads which are to be widened. However, these proposed land areas have still not been purchased.

Sources

BBCnews.com, 8 Oct 2006

CNN.com, 17 June 2006





Malaysia

Air quality in 14 areas across Malaysia lingered in the unhealthy range, with the Air Pollutant Index exceeding 100. Such poor air quality have not only posed health and safety hazards, but also a blow to the nation's economy.

The poor air quality has resulted in a rise in the number illnesses, in particular skin allergies, eye irritation, respiratory problems, coughs and flu. As such, more people have opted to stay indoors. This has affected many outdoor eateries. Traders at roadside stalls, coffee shops and restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, for instance, complained of a 20% drop in business has people avoid eating out due to the haze.

Smog from the fires has also disrupted air traffic. The helicopter service, a key mode of transport in Sarawak, for instance had been stopped due to poor visibility. This is set to be a blow to Sarawak's tourism industry.

In peninsular Malaysia, locations in five states including the tourist destination of Malacca posted unhealthy air quality between 101 and 116.

Malaysia had also issued a hazard warning for ships plying the Malacca Strait due to the poor visibility along the waterway. Clear visibility of at least 10 kilometers had plunged to below five. This is highly dangerous for small boats who lack navigational equipment.

Some 50,000 ships use the Malacca Strait in a year, carrying 40% of world trade, including 80% of the energy supplies of China and Japan.

Malaysian officials have called on Indonesia to take proactive action on the haze issue. With increasing resentment amongst Malaysians towards Indonesia, officials foresee the potential of both an economic and political fallout should Indonesia not take the matter seriously.

Sources

Channel News Asia, 5, 9 October 2006
The Star Online, 10 October 2006
The Shipping Times, 10 October 2006

Hazy Days

Singapore

The haze in Singapore had reached its peak at a PSI level of 150 on the 7th of September this year. According to economists, Singapore has suffered an estimated loss of US\$50m since the onset of the haze.

This economic loss, however, is minuscule when compared to the impact that the haze had on the economy in 1997. Although the PSI index in 1997 was lower, its economic losses totaled US\$300m.

A possible reason for this is the greater availability of alternatives. Home delivery services, such as McDelivery by McDonalds, witnessed an increase in sales during the weekend when the haze was at its worst. Gymnasiums, such as Planet Fitness, also saw a rise of about 15% in patronage during that weekend. Shopping malls have also been an avenue of escape from the haze for many. There has also been an increase in the sale of face masks, air purifiers and eye drops.

Nonetheless, Singaporeans, like their counterparts across the causeway, have noted a rise in haze-related illnesses. Elderly nursing homes have also reduced their outdoor activities so as to not jeopardize the health of their residents. The government has also taken precautions along sea lanes and issued health advisories.

Singapore hopes that Indonesia will look into the matter effectively.

Sources

Channel News Asia, 7, 9, 12 October 2006
The Shipping Times, 10 October 2006

What are you going to do about it, Indonesia?

Officials from Singapore and Malaysia have called on Indonesia to be more proactive in resolving the haze situation. With the highest levels of poor air quality recorded ever, the need for Indonesia to take concrete action is critical.

Indonesia has had its own share of haze-related repercussions. Apart from the rise in outpatient cases in hospitals and plunge in small business profits, it recorded its first smog-related accident when two vessels collided on the Batanghari river in Jambi, leaving one passenger missing. Passenger ferries have also been delayed due to poor visibility in Riau.

There have been a series of responses from Indonesia. Farmers put the blame on the wind for carrying the smoke to other parts of the region while Indonesian Forestry Minister accused its neighbours of not being grateful for their oxygen producing forests.

Even so, Indonesia knows that it cannot play the blame game forever. Its own media has bashed the government for its incompetence in solving the problem. 'What's wrong with us? Who do we think we are, as a nation and a government, to cause such suffering to our neighbours and our own people?' The Jakarta Post asked in an editorial published on October 10. The media has also called on the government to come up with strong deterrents and punish all those found to be responsible for the fires.

These pressures, both local and regional, have thus caused Indonesian President Yudhoyono to apologize to Malaysia and Singapore and assuring them that Indonesia is serious and determined to remedy the problem. Indonesia also played host to the Sub-Regional Environment Ministerial Meeting on Transboundary Haze Pollution on Oct 13 in Pekanbaru. Ahead of the talks, the host nation noted that it would greatly benefit from equipment and technological assistance from its regional neighbours to deal with the haze. Indonesia also noted that it would ratify the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution signed in 2002, but did not indicate when exactly it would carry out the ratification.

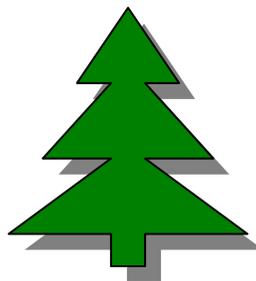
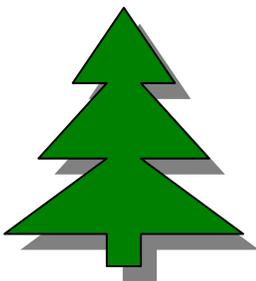
Separately the government announced it had earmarked nearly 11 million dollars to spend on measures aimed at dousing the fires, which can smoulder for weeks if lit in peatland areas. According to welfare minister Aburizal Bakrie, the money would be used to hire two helicopters from a private Malaysian firm, two aircraft from Russia and one from Australia. The Russian planes, capable of carrying 42,000 litres of water to dump on the fires on Sumatra and Kalimantan, would be used from Sunday. The helicopters and Australian plane would be used to seed clouds with chemicals in a bid to artificially create rain.

Sources

The Jakarta Post, 10 October 2006

Straits Times, 10, 12 October 2006

Channel News Asia, 12, 13 October 2006





To Coup or Not To Coup

Thais have been divided over the political situation in the country. While some welcome the military coup on 19 September as a break from Thaksin Shinawatra's corrupt and autocratic rule, others fear that military rule would be merely a continuation of that autocracy.

There are several reasons in support of the coup. Firstly the Thaksin regime had been accused of deep and widespread corruption in Thailand. Selfish behaviour and the appearance of greed and ignoring justice were common accusations. The crucial issue appeared over the sale of Thaksin's own Telecom industry worth of two billion dollar to Shin Corporation tax- free. The sale of such an important Thai business was seen by many Thais as unpatriotic and triggered fifty thousand people to take to the streets of Bangkok to show their discontentment. Waves of street protests convinced Thaksin to step down temporarily and call a new election in April but the poll was a failure as members of Election Commission were jailed on charges of helping Thaksin's party.

Secondly, Thaksin's implementation of emergency rule in 2005 to deal with violence in the Southern Muslim states of Thailand was criticized as encouraging greater oppression towards Thailand's Muslim minority. More than 1400 people have been killed in nearly three years of violence in the South and the unrest continued intensely despite Thaksin's imposition of martial law. As such, Thailand's southern muslims, have been supportive of coup leader General Sonthi, a Muslim himself, who led the coup and has promised to hold peace talks with Islamic separatists.

**Is Democracy
Dead?**

Thirdly, the political transition was peaceful and did not affect daily Thai activities. In the resort town of Pattaya, for instance, it was business as usual with tourists as well as locals being oblivious to the bloodless military take-over. One could also argue that Thais are somewhat immune to such political transitions. Thailand had 17 military coups between 1932, when the constitutional monarchy was established, and 1991-92. Hence, they see it as merely another "change of government"

Yet, many in the international community disapproved of the coup, seeing it as a step back in the democratization process. Many have thus called for a return to democratic rule as soon as possible. The United States has been particular aggressive in this by cutting off nearly 24 million dollars in military aid to Thailand until a democratically elected government takes office, ideally before the 1-year deadline as stated by Thai Military Officials. Such sanctions only serve to jolt years of close links between Thai and US forces in the Asia-Pacific, which co-host the region's biggest annual American war games. The aid cut-off involved foreign military financing, international military education and training, and peacekeeping operations.

Despite this, the US still acknowledges Thailand's role as a key US diplomatic and non-NATO ally as well as a crucial partner in its "War on Terror". This was evident in August 2003 when Hambali, leader of the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Southeast Asian terror group Jemaah Islamiya, was captured in Thailand. As such, Washington will maintain US\$9.77 million in aid to Thailand deemed only for US national interests, focusing on counter-terrorism, combating weapons of mass destruction and fighting communicable diseases.

The presence of a military government in Thailand also impedes any efforts in introducing democratic changes in neighbouring Myanmar. Thailand is one of the few countries with real influence over Burma's repressive military

junta. As such, it is likely that the Burmese will see the Thai coup as a justification for inaction towards democratization.

East Timor: Sacrificing Justice for “Big Brother’s” Democracy

Justice for human rights violations and genocide in East Timor maybe on hold for another 5 to 10 years. In an interview with BBC’s Zeinab Badawi on Hardtalk, the Prime Minister of East Timor Jose Ramos Horta noted that justice for East Timorese can only be ensured once Indonesia has consolidated its democratization process.

While the East Timor government has been criticized for not pushing for justice and reconciliation for human rights abuses by Indonesian soldiers during its occupation, PM Horta suggests that it is essential to be sensitive to their immediate and dominant neighbour’s currently complex political situation.

Indonesia has a lot to handle on its plate; recovering from a series of natural/environmental disasters (tsunami, earthquake, mud floods, etc), bird flu outbreak and terror threats, just to name a few. Hence, urging to put Indonesian generals on trial at this point, Horta says, would only increase the already daunting pressures on Indonesia’s fragile democracy and make the Indonesian military less willing to cooperate with East Timorese.

He goes further to support his argument by saying that East Timorese had spent 500 years of waiting for independence since Portuguese invasion. Hence, he optimistically urges East Timorese to exercise patience for “another 5 to 10 years”.

Yet, with the ongoing violence, rampant poverty (especially outside Dili) and mismanagement of funds in East Timor it is uncertain how patient East Timorese can be.

Sources

BBC Hardtalk, 27 Sept 2006

Moreover, one cannot deny the limits put on democracy under martial law, such as press censorship and travel bans. Days after the coup, certain websites have been blocked and over 300 community radio stations in northern rural pro-Thaksin provinces have been shut down. Local political activists’ plans to stage an anti-coup protest in Bangkok were foiled by a travel ban on all grassroots organizations.

The Thai military has made some inroads towards establishing a new government, but not without criticism. General Sonthi assured Thais that the military had no intention of holding power in the long run and would revert back to a democratic system by holding elections within a year. However, now with its new interim government headed by yet another General, though retired, many in the international community remain skeptical whether democratic rule would ever return.

Even so, many Thais remain positive, given General Surayud’s clean track record and reputation as a one of the most highly regarded and respected military officials in Thailand. This seems to suggest that stability and transparency override democracy in Thailand. Even opposition leader Korn Chatikavanij, deputy general secretary of the Democrat Party, supports General Surayud’s appointment as an “appropriate” choice in a time when domestic reconciliation is critical.

Moreover the significant role of the Thai monarchy in the Thai psyche cannot be denied. Loyalty and utmost respect to their semi-devine leader only serves to reinforce the need for stability and transparency in government so as to not undermine the fundamental pillar of Thai power.

With that said, the international community, in particular the West, should not be alarmed by these Thai opinions. After all, doesn’t democracy espouse respecting the views of others?

If a clean and responsible government is what Thailand wants, whether democratically or not, then so be it. All that remains is to see how long the military takes to fulfill its promise of re-establishing a democratic government. By fulfilling this promise, the military could possibly gain credibility from the international community and thus diffuse perceptions of a corrupt and autocratic military regime.

Sources

ChannelNews Asia, 21, 27 & 29 Sept 2006

Gulf Times, 25 September 2006

Japan Times, 28 September 2006

The New Nation, 27 Sept 2006

Bangkok Post, 28 Sept 2006

BBC News, 28 Sept 2006





Bangladesh's Bitter Protests

Protests and strikes occur frequently in Bangladesh. Of late, an alliance of 14 opposition parties has called for protests to demand the resignation of election commissioners. It accuses the commissioners of a pro-government bias. Under Bangladesh's constitution, the Prime Minister, Khaleda Zia, is to hand over power to a caretaker administration when her five-year term expires in October. The opposition alliance, led by the former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, alleges that the government is preparing to rig the polls due in January 2007.

Hundreds of protestors raised slogans asking the government to carry out the reforms or face more protests. Schools, shops and most offices remained closed in response to a country-wide strike called by the opposition alliance. The alliance has been staging a series of general strikes and street protests in recent months, with many turning violent with clashes between opposition supporters and police.

Bangladeshis have also been protesting against frequent power cuts. Rapid economic growth in Bangladesh, spurred by the government to alleviate widespread poverty, has led to massive electricity shortages, including cuts of up to six hours a day in the capital. This too, unfortunately, has resulted in violent clashes between protesters and police. Teargas and batons have been used on several occasions to subdue hundreds of rioters in Dhaka. A report said over 200 people were injured.

But what does this all mean for the ordinary man on the streets of Dhaka. Nothing really. For many Bangladeshis, life is hard. The disruption caused by politics only worsens the situation in the vastly poor state. The blockades and sieges stop trucks bringing in supplies to shops, and the general strikes discourage customers from coming. Businesses say the unrest costs the country billions of dollars a year.

Bangladeshis therefore find themselves in a catch 22 situation. On the one hand, they feel the need to voice their resentment against the government for not ensuring their basic need for electricity and freedom to have a fair election. Yet on the other hand, the immense disruption caused by these protests and strikes often indicates that perhaps it is better to stick with the status quo and not to protest at all.

Sources

BBCnews.com – 19th & 21st Sep, 5th Oct 2006

Reuters, 24 Sept 2006

The Financial Express, 29 Sept 2006

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