



NTS ALERT

Extreme weather conditions, a result of climate change, have afflicted many Asian States in recent days, mostly in the form of intensive rainfall and flashfloods. This edition notes the disastrous effects of these extreme weather conditions and what has been done to alleviate the crises.

Indonesia

With memories of the 2004 tsunami still fresh in many Indonesians' minds, recent natural disasters have done little to alleviate their suffering. Just days before the 2nd anniversary of the 2004 tsunami, Sumatra was rocked by yet another earthquake. In addition to this, heavy rainfall caused further disaster with floods and landslides.

With a current death toll of at least 100 and many more missing, the numbers are likely to increase as rescue operations try to make their way to the more remote affected areas. Authorities said an estimated 42,000 residents had been driven from their homes by the floodwaters. Most of the damage was in Aceh's Tamiang district, on the northern tip of Sumatra.

Mustafa Abu Bakar, Aceh's acting governor, noted that army helicopters and navy ships had been deployed to deliver aid and help in the rescue efforts in the remote areas. Even so, rescue efforts have been hampered by the soft soil, which has made it impossible to bring in heavy equipment to assist in recovering the victims. Many victims still remain trapped as access roads have been cut off by the floods. Communications to the area were also down. At least 16 villages still remain unreachable by water



Asia Under Water

and land vehicles. Officials have called for more volunteers to assist in clearing up mud and rubbish washed up by the floods.

Authorities have blamed heavy rains as well as the effects of deforestation for the destruction. Lack of adequate forest cover leaves the ground less able to absorb excess water.

Many other countries have offered assistance to Indonesia. The United States has pledged US\$100,000 in emergency assistance through the Red Cross to supply hygiene kits, plastic sheets, sleeping mats and other items for flood victims. Even so, while government and aid organisations had sufficient supplies of food, tents and medicine, the lack of capacity to transport these supplies to remote areas remains a problem.

In this edition:-

- Indonesia
 - Floods in Aceh
 - Raging Storms Cause Disasters at Sea
- Sri Lanka
- Malaysia
- Philippines
- Singapore
- Predictions for Hong Kong
- China : Transparency Vital in Tackling Climate Change



This delay in sending vital aid to the flood victims only serves to exacerbate human suffering and in turn chaos amongst the victims. Looting was reported at a distribution post in Payabedi, Aceh by a mob who were enraged that they had not received any food supplies. The mob comprised of largely mothers carrying their children. Finding no food, the angry women seized whatever came to hand and made off with plastic buckets and cooking utensils. For them, the food security of their children was paramount rather than their own.

The Indonesia government has made arrangements for providing health services in refugee camps. Similar to past incidents of floods, there have been cases of fever, diarrhea, upper respiratory infections and other related diseases.

Raging Storms Cause Disasters at Sea

Just days before the New Year, 2 incidents of capsized ferries in Indonesian waters occurred within 24 hours. Raging storms were blamed for the disasters.

The first incident occurred in the Bangka Straits off the southern coast of Sumatra. Rescuers found 28 people and 31 bodies, from the sunk ferry that had carried about 100 people. The second incident occurred off the coast of Central Java. At least 66 victims have been rescued out of the 500 to 600 passengers on the ferry.

Unfortunately exact figures of the number of victims cannot be ascertained due to the fact that many of Indonesia's ferries often carry more passengers than they are allowed to, thus do not officially record the extra passengers.

Ferries are the main means of transport between islands in Indonesia as they are cheaper than airplanes. However, poor enforcement of safety standards on ferries greatly threatens the lives of its passengers, thus causing accidents to occur during poor weather conditions.

Source

500 missing after ferry capsizes off Java, *The Sunday Times*, 31 December 2006

Sri Lanka

Just days prior to Boxing day, floods have displaced at least 40,000 people in Sri Lanka as the country prepares to commemorate the second anniversary of the Asian tsunami disaster. The districts of Hambantota and Ampara, which had been the two of the worst hit by the December 2004 tsunami, were again under water due to the recent floods.

According to officials, flooding in the south and east was compounded by the overflowing of several irrigation tanks after heavy rains. Rescue work has been ongoing whilst also providing homeless flood victims with food and shelter.

Sri Lanka, where 31,000 people died in the tsunami, depends on monsoon rains for farming as well as power generation. However, the seasonal downpours frequently caused loss of life and damage to property in low-lying areas.

The two main monsoons in Sri Lanka are from May to September and December to February. Rains also lash different parts of the island between October and November and again between March and April

Sources

Flash Floods, landslide kill 109 on Indonesian island, *China Daily*, 27 Dec 2006

Flood Survivors in Dire Need of Medicine, *The Straits Times*, 30 December 2006

Floods swamp S. Lanka, *The Straits Times*, 19 Dec 2006
Landslide kills 18 villagers in Sumatra, *The Straits Times*, 16 Dec 2006

80 Dead in Indonesian Floods and Landslides, *Daily Times*, 27 Dec 2006

Malaysia

Continuous rainfall in Malaysia caused a series of floods in several states, in particular Johor and neighbouring states Pahang, Negeri Sembilan and Malacca. In South Malaysia, a total of 126 villages with close to 500 families were affected by the north-eastern monsoon rains, which had inundated villages, highways and residential areas in eight of Johor's nine districts. The rain has also triggered mudslides, thus

causing greater damage and even disrupting south bound rail services, including to Singapore.

The Hyogo Framework

In January 2005, 168 governments gathered in Kobe, Japan for the UN-sponsored World Conference on Disaster Reduction. The Hyogo Framework for Action, a global 10 year plan (2005- 2015) for disaster risk reduction efforts, was adopted in a bid to reduce disaster losses by 2015 in terms of lives and social, economic and environmental assets of communities and countries.

Priorities for action include:

- ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation
- identifying, assessing and monitoring disaster risks and improve early warning
- using knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels
- reducing the underlying risk factors
- strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels

Source

International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Damages to roads and bridges due to massive floods in southern Malaysia cost more than 22 million dollars, a figure the government expects to rise with the water levels. Malaysia's Meteorological Department predicted continuous rainfall in several states over the week entering the new year, and warned of rough seas in the eastern and southern coastal areas.

The potential for the spread of diseases was highlighted in the Malaysian town of Segamat as an estimated 3000 tons of rubbish had been washed up due to the floods. Government officials have begun cleaning up works, including disinfectant sprays, for the town and many of its residential areas and may take as long as 2 weeks to complete. Besides national authorities, 24 local councils had also been given the task to set up and supervise their own private teams of rubbish collectors.

Floods have also given rise to other threats to victims' safety. Several newspapers had reported that crocodiles were menacing flood victims and stealing chickens from backyard coops. Pythons and cobras had also been spotted in abandoned houses.

Lower income groups have been the hardest hit by the floods and the government has been urged to devise a comprehensive relief scheme to help the affected people. According to the president of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), Syed Shahir Syed Mohamud, such a scheme is necessary to protect the increasing number of Malaysians who are losing their livelihood due to natural disasters such as floods.

Such loss of livelihood has pushed many to loot shops, thus causing a further cycle of poverty and disorder. Cases of looting had been reported in all the affected areas. Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has denounced looters and urged the public to make citizen's arrests as police struggle to cope after thousands of people abandoned their homes to escape rising waters.

Has the government done enough?

Government officials have defended their efforts and early disaster warning systems and note that sufficient time was given to people to take the necessary precautions. Although floods in Malaysia during the monsoon seasons are common, the amount of rainfall during the past weeks have greatly surpassed average levels in previous years.

Speaking to reporters after launching the National Disaster Awareness Day 2006 and its two day seminar in Kuala Lumpur, Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz from the Prime Minister's Office highlighted that although the intense magnitude of the flood was unexpected, an estimated 74,000 flood victims had been evacuated within the first 3 days – many of whom were placed in schools and town halls. The government had also announced aid for 33,000 students affected by the floods, who will receive funds to replace school uniforms and books before the school year resumes on the 3rd of January.

While such operational measures are commendable, opposition members blame the government's lack of foresight in addressing issues that could have minimized the extent of the damage.





Firstly, deforestation has not been dealt with effectively, as seen in Indonesia. The large-scale illegal logging that has been in operation for the past two years at the edge of a forest reserve near the Muar river, has contributed to the floods. Tropical rain forests are known to have a 'sponging effect' by cushioning heavy rainfall and preventing or minimising floods. With the decreased mass of trees in the area, the sponging effect is reduced thus exacerbating the floods in neighbouring areas such as town of Segamat.

Secondly, opposition members suggest that floods in other areas such as Johor Bahru City, Kulai and Skudai were caused by poorly monitored housing development projects and an outdated drainage system.

In light of such criticism, the government has announced that it would apply the Hyogo Framework for Action which emphasizes the concept of mainstreaming disaster risk reduction into development policies, planning and implementation. The policy would require cooperation from several sectors including town planners, local authorities, environment department and drainage and irrigation department.

Malaysia has also received assistance from its neighbours. Relief teams from the Singapore Red Cross and Mercy Relief handed over relief supplies worth S\$45,000 to the flood victims in Johor. Among the supplies were 3000 hygiene packs, 100 water filters, drinking water, food, infant milk and clothes.

Sources

21000 evacuated as floods worsen in South M'sia, *Straits Times*, 20 Dec 2006
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 Lower Income Groups Hardest Hit by Floods, *Sun2Surf*, 26 Dec 2006
 Malaysia Flood Causes more than 22 million dollars in damages, *Deutsche Presse Agentur*, 27 Dec 2006
 Nazri: Early Disaster Warning Systems Adequate, 27 Dec 2006
 PM Condemns Looting After Floods, *Malaysiakini*, 24 Dec 2006

Work in Johor done, Singapore relief teams return, *The Straits Times*, 30 December 2006

Philippines

In Bacolod City, the tropical storm "Tomas" brought heavy rains that forced 1,775 families to scramble for higher ground as flash floods denuded seaside villages in the early morning of 20th December. Big business establishments on the city's main street had to cancel operations due to waist-high floodwaters. According to the City Disaster Management Office, the flooding was aggravated by the high tide, and consequently destroyed 65 houses in Mandalagan district.

Mayor Evelio Leonardia, councilors and other city officials surveyed the flooded barangays and the evacuation of affected families. Fortunately, waters quickly receded later that day and only a few families were left in the evacuation centres.

Source

1,775 families flee Bacolod flash floods, *Manila Times*, 21 Dec 2006

Singapore

Relatively more developed regions have also not been spared by the intense rainfall. In Singapore, heavy continuous rainfall caused massive floods in Thompson Road. The National Environment Agency says over the last 10 days, rainfall hit nearly 750 mm, more than double the long-term average rainfall for December which is about 280 mm.

Compared to its neighbours, damage from the floods in Singapore is largely limited to the economy. Many of those affected in Thomson road, were nurseries, which were left chest-deep in water due to the surging waters from MacRitchie Reservoir. This greatly crippled their business over the festive season.

Coupled with the effects from the haze prior to this, economists suggest economic losses are to escalate with the onslaught of the monsoon rain. Productivity losses could stem from people arriving late at work while construction sites would experience delays in completing projects thus causing economic losses to business entities. Other losses include higher probability of road traffic accidents, damage to

property and businesses and a rise in numbers of vehicles sent in for repairs.

Source

Heavy rain leaves nurseries along Thomson Road chest-deep in water, *Today*, 21 December 2006

Predictions for Hong Kong

Civic Exchange, a leading Hong Kong think-tank has released the first study examining the likely impact of climate change on Hong Kong and the Pearl River delta, southern China's manufacturing and trade centre. The study concludes that even small water-level rises combined with extreme weather could cause flooding across the low-lying delta. Damage caused by such flooding could possibly result in a shutdown of many

key industries and trade across the delta and in Hong Kong.

Given the importance of this region to world trade, the effects could be widely felt. Key infrastructure such as ports, power lines and drainage systems will fail to function. Civic Exchange has noted that it is, therefore, vital that policy makers effectively engage in improving coastal defences. Scientists' predictions of a 30-cm rise in sea level within about 20 years suggest a greater risk of water surges caused by typhoons and heavy rain.

Source

Hong Kong's 'Climate Change threat' *BBCnews*, 23 Nov 2006

China: Transparency Vital in tackling Climate Change

Soaring pollution levels in China may be even worse than expected as local governments bent on economic growth lie about their progress in meeting environmental goals. This was based on information presented by China's leading environment watchdog, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) to the country's legislation.

According to SEPA, while China's national goal is to reduce the emission of its two main pollutants – chemical oxygen and sulphur dioxide – by 2 percent, it has in fact grown by 2 percent.

A large contributing factor to this would be the lack of law enforcement. The government has promised to make cleaning up the environment a priority over the next five years but attempts by the environmental agency to crack down on big polluters have generally failed. Illegal chemicals plants as well as paper and leather mills, many of which still use outdated technologies, continue to thrive with the support of government officials that have a financial stake in economic growth. Some local government leaders have even been reported to directly interfere in environmental law enforcement by threatening to remove, demote and retaliate against environmental officials.

Sources

Bogus data masks China's pollution woes, state media says, *Today*, 29 Dec 2006
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NTS Asia Secretary- General
Amitav Acharya

NTS-Asia Coordinator
Mely Caballero Anthony

**NTS-Asia Research Analyst /
Webmaster**
Sofiah Jamil



NTS Alert Team
Mely Caballero Anthony
Sofiah Jamil
Sujoyini Mandal

Website
www.rsis-ntsasia.org

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