

More Fall 2011 Thai Flood Photos: Part 3

Still Open for Business



Life goes on, flood or no flood. In some areas, temporary board walks were built to allow people to keep dry and walk to shops along flooded streets. Many shops were flooded with as much as 1 m of water inside.

By moving goods to higher shelves and extending the elevated walkways inside, some businesses were able to stay open and supply the needs of local residents.



One can only imagine the emotional state of these merchants. They have so much invested in goods. Many may not have insurance. Most are small family businesses. They stand to lose everything if the flood waters continue to rise. With limited resources, recovery may be very hard if not impossible for many.

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In some areas, the electricity was shut off to prevent accidental electrocutions. Candles, batteries, and oil lamps premium items sought by shoppers. With so many roads flooded, many shops cannot get more supplies to meet increased demand. Merchants are being asked NOT to raise prices due to the flood.



Some businesses managed to stay dry by putting up sand bag barriers and keep flood waters at bay. Some were lucky to have temporary board walks available. And others put up with the water as best they could and literally went with the flow.

The magnitude and severity of the flooding hits home when you realize some parts of Thailand have been under water for 2 months!

A frequent response being voiced is astonishment at the extent of the flood, the amount and depth of the water, how rapidly the water rose, and exclamations of how they have never known flooding this bad for the decades they have lived in the area.



Distributing Relief Supplies

The Thai approach to disaster relief is to set up service centers where food, water, and relief supplies are delivered for distribution. Those seeking relief make their way to these relief centers and get in line to get the service / goods.

However, the unprecedented scale of this year's flooding has stretched Thai government services severely. With the police and military spread far and wide, many residents have resisted or ignored evacuation orders to stay and guard their flooded homes against looters.



Donated fresh vegetables at a relief center



Volunteers carrying relief supplies to be delivered.



Flood victims waiting to apply for cash compensation.



This has forced the government to divert rescue and evacuation resources (e.g. boats, trucks and people) to deliver prepared food, water, and other relief supplies to people staying in flooded homes. Reports of food poisoning may be the result from the long delay in delivering prepared food after it was cooked.

A big fear of disaster relief managers is subsequent flood waters may rise so fast it will be impossible to evacuate those who chose to stay behind.

Some government benefits to flood victims are given in cash payments. People must show proper ID, proof of residence, and meet certain criteria about the degree and duration of the flooding of their residence. As might be expected, the number of applicants swamps the government workers who are assigned to process the paperwork. And of course, people must make their way to approved relief centers to start the process.

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Many volunteers show up at the service centers and pitch in to prepare vegetables, rice, meat and fruit for meals they serve to anyone showing up and needing food.

Other volunteers fill bags with donated relief items (e.g. instant noodles, tooth brushes, toothpaste, soap, etc.) that are distributed to flood victims unable to get to the service centers.



Other helping hands move the bags of prepared relief supplies to trucks or boats for transport to various flood areas in and around the flood zones.

People of all ages and backgrounds come together to overcome this national crisis. They find unity in action to help themselves and others in time of need. Maybe this sense of unity can endure beyond the floods and help heal Thailand after the years of political discord.



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As of 19 Oct, 2011, 27 of the 77 Thai provinces flooded and about 9 million people affected, government resources are stretched thin. Some flood victims complain they have received no help from the government at all. People and groups of common citizens mobilize to help each other. These groups organize donation drop off points, assemble relief packages, and distribute them at local community centers or take them to give to those in flooded homes.



Helicopters in Action



An apparent recon flight with officials trying to determine the extent of the flooding.

I didn't see any dramatic helicopter rescue scenes. What I did see was mostly aerial recon and some dropping of relief supplies. They hover about 5-10 m above the water near the recipients, then drop a styrofoam case of supplies into the water. Recipients were in boats waiting to get the parcels. In the photos below, look just below the helicopters for a white box being dropped. Then look for the white boxes in the water.



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Helicopters drop relief supplies (white spots in left photo) to people waiting in boats in flooded areas.



Helicopter landing pads are non-existent or flooded making it hazardous to land on uncertain flooded terrain. People in less flooded areas where water is less than knee deep get supplies dropped to them from a lower altitude overhead.

The US is sending more helicopters to help in the Thai flood relief effort. The extent of the flooding is such that many areas cannot be reached by other means.



Volunteers laying low after loading sandbags

Shelter

There were reports that 150 relief centers / shelters have been set up. But this number seems very miniscule when faced with the 9 million flood victims. Of course, it is unclear how many of the total “affected” have no shelter at all. There are many folks camped on the shoulders of roads which are mere inches above water.



Harvesting Rice Early Before Its Flooded



In farm areas where flood waters threaten to drown rice fields, farmers rush to pump flood waters out of their paddies in order to buy time to harvest the rice early. Immature rice is not the best harvest, but it is better than no harvest at all.

The rice grains will not be fully developed, so will be a lighter weight, less nutritious, and command a lower price. With the rainy weather, it will also be harder to dry it. The damp conditions could mean the formation of mold rendering the crop unsuitable for food (but usable to make alcohol).

Rice farming is hard work. But the normal harvest takes place in a dry field. It is more difficult to harvest rice when you are waist deep in water. Add to this the cost of fuel for the water pump, and the longer time to get the harvest in, and you have all the makings of a classic “caught between a rock and a hard spot” of higher costs and lower earnings to add to the cycle of debt. The policy of the current government (before the flood) to buy rice directly from farmers at higher than market prices may cause complications in future exports and prices for consumers world-wide.



Rural Flashfloods & Landslides

With so much attention focused on Bangkok and the industrial zones, the plight of the rural poor seems to hardly show up on the current media radar. Many of the mountainous areas are isolated even in the best of times. But the recent rains caused flashfloods and landslides that have devastated some villages. Rescue and relief work is ongoing, but gets scant coverage in the news.



Rural villages conducting a ceremony after a flashflood hit their village changing things beyond recognition.



A flashflood took out a vital bridge linking villages to the outside world making replacement a top priority.



Without bridges, rescue and evacuation methods increase the hazards for survivors.

Much of the government response relies on purchasing relief goods and supplies from local shops and stores. The military has been mobilized throughout the country. But there don't seem to be government stockpiles of emergency supplies. Buying locally helps these rural local economies, but in emergencies, panic buying among the general public quickly reduces inventories making it more difficult to obtain adequate relief supplies. And, in a free market economy, increased demand in times of short supply often means price increases. It all begins to look like an upward spiraling of challenges for disaster relief managers and survivors. One can only wonder what impact disaster preparedness training could have done for these folks.

Where is the High Ground?

In the floodplain of the Chao Phraya River, the high ground is often the main roads, railroads, and highway bridges. These are built “above grade” to keep them from being flooded. But in 2011, the worst floods in 50 years apparently exceeded the anticipated road design flood levels.

Many major highways going north from Bangkok are flooded. Highway status reports change daily, but there appear to be 2 general categories: flooded to an impassible depth; flooded but passable (i.e shallow water across all lanes or some lanes closed). Survivors camping on the shoulders adds to the traffic congestion.



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The roads in the photos below are considered flooded but passable. But rising flood waters can quickly change the situation. In some cases, water that was knee deep changed to be chest deep in only a matter of minutes. Such rapid changes makes driving on passable flood roads risky at best. This adds to the difficulties of evacuation and relief logistics.

(To be continued)



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