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Natural Disasters in Thailand

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Most people perceive that tsunamis are the main natural disaster threatening Thailand, but the statistic evidence suggests that it is actually floods. This is in part because there are inconsistencies in current data measuring disasters in Thailand, and it appears the impact of flooding is somewhat underestimated. Other problems with disaster data from the government include the lack of reporting on economic loss. And some natural disasters, such as landslides, occur in remote areas and their impact is difficult to measure.

In Thailand, only 0.1% of the government's budget is allocated for disasters. In 2002, the government passed the reorganization act which created more ministries, but with fewer departments in each ministry. The Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM) was established in 2002 and the Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Act B.E.2550 was enacted in 2007. DDPM has prepared and updated a five-year National Disaster Plan accordingly. There are also other separate plans, related to natural disasters – some are of DDPM and the others are of other departments and ministries, as there are over 28 agencies involved in natural disaster management. This is problematic since one department has no authority to order other departments and groups to act, so the National Disaster Plan is not yet functional. Also, in Thailand the provincial governors have more 'action' authority than the country's prime minister, such as bringing in the army to deal with a disaster.

Currently Thailand is suffering from severe flooding. Inner Bangkok is protected by the King Dyke, made in 1982. A prominent engineer who has led a modeling study for over 20 years suggested, based on his model, that there was too much water in upper Thailand, so it will need to be channeled and some areas will have to be flooded. The choice was either to divert the floodwaters to the west side of Central Plain, destroying the rice fields located there, or to divert the water to the east side, which is primarily industrial plants and infrastructure (including a Honda plant). The damage to the rice fields was estimated to be worth 1/10 of the damages to the industrial area. However, information from an unconfirmed source suggested that there was political support for saving the rice fields and that water was to be diverted to the east side until the rice was harvested, then the west side would take it. So the east side was flooded, but by the time

the rice was harvested, the industrial areas had been destroyed. To make matters worse, there is still too much water, so Bangkok is being flooded and Don Muang Airport has been shut down. Further compounding the problem, there are disputes between the prime minister's team and the Bangkok governor's team in managing the flood in Bangkok and vicinity area.

The 2011 flood has the same footprint as the 1995 flood, though modeling predicted this year's flood wouldn't occur until 2020. While the 2011 and 1995 floods contained about the same amount of water mass, this year's flood has resulted in much more severe damage. The majority of this damage owes to the fact that there has been industrial expansion along the rivers and on the flood plains, despite knowing at some future date there would be flooding. The Thailand government has a disaster compensation scheme, but it is only $180 per family. Thai civil law seems unable to cope with disasters that contain uncertainty. Also, the national disaster master plan needs a legal status at least equivalent to a decree. And climate change has not been taken into account in Thailand regarding flooding. Also, the Thai government has a hard time making decisions involving risk – they want scenarios to be either/or (i.e., will it flood or not?).