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## Thailand's Floods: Political and Security Impact

By Antonio L Rappa

### Synopsis

*The devastating floods in Thailand add another dimension to the range of security threats to the country. What are the political and security implications of the floods on Thailand?*

### Commentary

THE WIDESPREAD floods in central Thailand have added another dimension to the security threats to the country which, since 1932, have largely been domestic ones. The flood-damage to basic security infrastructure will cost at least S\$1.9 billion, according to police and military analysts. In times like these, it is political will that will secure the support of the people.

#### Political leadership

Strong political leadership can shift the impact of a crisis. Given the sea of security problems, Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has surprised critics by displaying calm resolve. The first woman prime minister in Thailand has taken a strong stand in facing the disaster. She recently empowered herself with the Natural Disaster Law to control all operations. Despite the reticence of army commanders, the PM is doing a remarkable job for someone who has had no previous political experience.

Yet, some Thai political commentators believe she reacted too late. The trigger point was when Ayutthaya overflowed. Ayutthaya is where some major industrial parks are totally submerged. There is concern over the general lack of coordination, confusion and miscommunication that have propelled images of discord. Yet, at the ground level, the Thais are really working together and they appear to be shelving the Red-Yellow divide, at least for now.

What is clear is that Thailand needs a long-term strategy to combat all environmental disasters and not just the annual flooding. The question remains as to the strength of the political will of the leadership.

#### Financial and human security

Another undercurrent is financial security. Thai economists believe the flood damage of about S\$1.9 billion is an understatement. Total damage to infrastructure and industry is likely to range between 3-5% of Thailand's GDP in PPP terms. With the lowering of the economic growth forecast by the Finance Ministry, the recovery period will take up to two years longer than expected.

The Disaster Prevention and Mitigation Department reports a death toll of no fewer than 527 with over two million people affected across 26 provinces. The Menam Chao Phraya is the main channel for the floodwaters. It is also a conduit for human trafficking which was an issue raised during the visit of the United Nations Rapporteur. Illegal Myanmar workers in Thailand are also scrambling for safety and security. The Bangkok Metropolitan Police as well as the police across 26 provinces are hard pressed to maintain law and order as well as to save lives.

The police's post-flood claims will increase pressures for a larger part of the national budget to fight the floods and sometimes fight the people. For example, locals in Khlong Sam Wa destroyed the sluice gates that are preventing the flooding of the Bangchan Industrial Estate. While negotiations continue with the locals, repairs have been made to prevent further flooding downstream. The basic strategy is to allow the flooding of areas north of Bangkok and diverting those flood waters to the east or west of Bangkok.

Thailand is the world's major exporter of premium grade rice. Over 20 percent of the rice crop may be damaged which will increase costs to consumers over the next two quarters. Rice storage bins left in any state of disrepair will suffer the consequences of the flooding and the rains. Stored rice grains has one worst enemy: water. It takes only a few minutes for a dry rice grain to soak up water.

Damage to major properties along the rivers and klongs now runs into billions of baht. This will lower yields on the real estate markets for at least another two quarters. Foreign direct investments are unlikely to return immediately. These factors combined with a global recession will make life in Thailand less than a pleasant investment experience.

### **Can PM survive the test?**

The Royal Thai Army was not prepared for the flood. Troops are scrambling to save their equipment and simultaneously save lives. But army commanders are uncomfortable with the prime minister's emergency natural disaster powers. The army wants to avoid conflict with locals destroying embankments, big dykes, and sluice gates.

Military hardware is also being moved but not mobilised. In order to avoid floodwaters, there are light armoured cars parked on the motorway outside Don Muang airbase. The military will have to raise its annual budget for the millions of dollars lost in the wake of the floods.

The greatest impact of the flooding in Thailand has yet to come. The likelihood of diseases and pestilence from stagnant water is high. It is too early for airborne pests to inflict their own wave of damage. People will also protest because they sacrificed their homes to save Inner Bangkok. These protests will lead to another round of clashes between the Reds and Yellows. But if Yingluck survives that test, she will be in a better position to avoid future coup d'états. And plan for the drought ahead.

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