

Thai floods a reflection of crisis of leadership?

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Thailand is drowning in what are believed to be the worst floods in more than half a century. The north and the central plains have by now been submerged in water, in places as high as two metres.

The Yingluck Shinawatra government is attempting to protect Bangkok from the raging floods — officials have been rushing to reinforce barriers and widen canals. But her attempts may have come a little too late. Bangkok's suburbs are fast being submerged. Without an emergency plan, downtown Bangkok could experience a similar catastrophe within days.

The deluge swept across the country from as early as late July. But it reached a crisis level early this month when Ayutthaya, Thailand's old capital and centre of key manufacturing plants, was heavily flooded. Factories owned by foreign conglomerates such as Honda, Nikon and Canon were forced to halt operations.

So far, almost 300 people have reportedly been killed, and more than 10 per cent of rice farms have been damaged. The situation was so bad that the Finance Ministry cut its forecast for economic growth to 3.7 per cent from 4 per cent and said the disaster may cause 120 billion baht (RM11.8 billion) of damage.

Despite the scale of devastation, it was only last week that Thai Prime Minister Yingluck acknowledged in a televised broadcast that this was becoming a national crisis. She set up a "war room" recently to tackle the crisis.

Many Thais are beginning to ask: is the crisis not so much about how to cope with this kind of natural disaster, but more about the crisis of leadership?

To be fair to Yingluck, she has been seen everywhere throughout the country, meeting with those affected by the floods and offering them basic commodities. She has worked around the clock, visiting the most remote regions to display her commitment to relieving the hardship of affected residents.

Will this be enough to prove her leadership? Probably not. So far, the government's solution to the crisis has been based on a one-(wo)man show strategy. All of Yingluck's ministers directly in charge of the disaster were nowhere to be seen at the beginning. Once they were coerced to take responsibility, they came up with conflicting solutions, thus further confusing the victims of the floods. There has been no integrated approach or a policy at a national level.

It is true that Thailand is not alone in its failure. The approach to flood management in much of Southeast Asia, according to the Asia Development Bank, has been piecemeal and localised. Instead of dealing with the root causes, they concentrate on building control structures such as flood embankments to protect habitation and agricultural land.

This is exactly what Yingluck has been doing. Thailand still lacks a long-term crisis management plan. Many questions remain unanswered: As more rains are expected, what would be the next

evacuation plan? How soon would Thailand be out of the crisis? What are the rehabilitation strategies once the water level decreases? And what kind of compensation is the government willing to offer to those hit by the floods?

Smith Dharmasaroja, head of the Natural Disaster Warning Foundation, argues: “The problem is water management. We kept too much water in the dams early in the rainy season, and now at the end of the season, they have to release a large amount of water at the same time, which has caused floods.”

He also noted: “This incident does not result from a natural disaster. Our problem is that we do not know how to manage water. We did not assess from the beginning of the rainy season whether there would be lots of rain and how much water should have been held in the dams ... The Irrigation Department and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand were afraid they would run out of water in the dry season. They made the wrong guess.”

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, speaking from his base in Dubai, observed: “Looking at it from a positive perspective, the current flood crisis provides a good opportunity for the government to think about an integrated water management system and I believe all parties would agree with it.”

It is no good excuse for Yingluck to claim that her government has just arrived in power and that she has been overwhelmed by other “political issues”. While there is no doubt she is very serious about finding a quick solution to the problem, a more important issue is, how will Thais assess her performance once the floods subside? — Today

P.S.

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