

Is Bangkok an ecological disaster in the making?

Flood prone Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, is home to more than 13 million people. Situated in an important low-lying river basin of the Chao Phraya, Bangkok is made up of islands and rivers, and it is for this reason that it is known as the Venice of the East.

Thanks to fertile soil, abundant rainfall and good water supplies, the land around Bangkok have traditionally served agricultural and fishing communities. Since the 1950s development efforts have included the construction of industries, and dams to provide electrical supplies. Rivers and canals have been diverted for irrigation purposes, and some filled in for road transportation. Apart from roads and canals, Bangkok is served by an efficient metro system, much of it above ground. Its development is a success story as many people have been lifted out of poverty, finding employment in its breweries and textile industry, transportation and working in its financial centre, tourism and hospitality industry.

Prosperity brings with it migration from rural Thailand, and the urban metropolis of Bangkok has expanded rapidly confining the floodplains. Added to this, the drawing of ground water for domestic and commercial use to serve this metropolis has resulted in the sinking of the city that until recently was 10cm a year. With sea levels rising as a result of global warming, the future of Bangkok as a capital appears threatened.

Although a flood of this magnitude had been forewarned, flooding was contained in years past. Today, more than 500 people have died in the floods, many thousands of people have temporarily lost their jobs, and millions are temporarily homeless. In addition, as floodwaters recede fears of an outbreak of water-borne diseases follow. The loss to the Thai economy from the tourism industry alone is expected to be close to £20 billion, according to media sources.

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