
SE Asia: Deforestation, floods and responsibilities

Some of the so called "natural disasters" --for example those related to floods-- actually result from the combination of natural and human-induced factors. Deforestation is one of the aspects more related to the vulnerability of affected areas in this respect. Lacking the natural coverage provided by the forest, hillsides become prone to landslides, thus increasing the effect of heavy rains associated to floods and their destructive potential (see WRM Bulletins 17 and 27).

In a major condemnation of widespread logging and other forest clearing activities that continue to occur across Asia, the United Nations Economic & Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has recently pointed out that deforestation was a major cause of the floods that last August devastated Indochina and the Mekong delta. Heavy rains and huge floods destroyed entire areas, caused the death of hundreds of people in Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, and forced more than a million people to abandon their lands and homes. While the Laotian Ministry of Agriculture considers that this event has been the worst in the country since 1978, Cambodian officials expressed that the number of deaths and the amount of destroyed crops would be high.

ESCAP said the intensity of flood disasters had increased in the region during the past few years. The UN agency also provides alarming figures concerning deforestation in Asia. Forests in most Asian countries have been reduced from 75% of their total area in 1945 to just 25% in 1995. Nevertheless governments --far from addressing the direct and indirect causes of deforestation-- continue to favour it by facilitating commercial logging and forest conversion to monoculture tree plantations. Official policies and not nature are to be considered responsible for the human and material losses produced by this kind of tragic events that --fuelled by climate change and contributing to it-- affect their respective countries.

Article based on information from: UN agency blames Mekong floods on deforestation, Reuters, 25/9/2000, in Worldwide Forest / Biodiversity Campaign News 25/9/2000, sent by Glen R. Barry, e-mail: grbarry@students.wisc.edu ; "Thousands flee flooding in Mekong Delta", The Nation, Saturday 2/9/2000, sent by Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA),