Thai floods: Roads turn to rivers in hard-hit city

TODD PITMAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

The lucky ones traverse this flood-submerged Thai city in navy boats and motorized canoes. The rest float on whatever they can find — inner tubes, swan-shaped pedal boats, huge chunks of muddied white plastic foam.

With large sections of Ayutthaya buried under a sea of one-story high water, rescue workers and volunteers are still crisscrossing town to pluck stranded residents from the ruins. Others are staying to protect what's left. One boy donned a snorkeling mask to inspect his house, its corrugated roof faintly visible below the murky brown waves.

"Nobody ever thought the water would rise this high," 54-year-old Pathumwan Choichuichai told The Associated Press in this city of ancient temples just north of Bangkok, minutes after a Thai navy team snatched her family from an apartment building where they were stranded for five days.

Epic monsoon rains and typhoons have battered a vast swath of Asia relentlessly this year, killing hundreds of people from the Philippines to India and inflicting billions of dollars in damage over the last four months. Thailand is among the hardest hit; the floods here are the worst in half a century, with more than 280 people killed since late July.

Flood waters have swamped more than two-thirds of the country, submerging rice fields and shutting down auto plants and tech companies like Western Digital Corp., which announced Wednesday it was halting production in Thailand to protect its staff.

For weeks, water has coursed down key rivers from the north in a slow-motion catastrophe, overwhelming a national system of dams and dikes. Several days ago, floods transformed Ayutthaya into disaster zone navigable in some districts only by boat.

Images of the damages wrought in Ayutthaya and elsewhere have fed fears that skyscraper-filled Bangkok could be engulfed by the weekend. Panicked residents of the capital have cleared supermarket shelves Wednesday to hoard bottled water and dried noodles, while luxury hotels have stockpiled sandbags around their perimeters.

The government said flood runoff from the north has already hit two provinces neighboring Bangkok — Pathum Thani and Nonthaburi. Authorities are also racing to reinforce flood barriers on the city's outskirts and dig new canals.

The crisis is proving to a be a major challenge for the administration of Yingluck Shinawatra, which took power in August. Her government has not been able to give

a reliable estimate of how bad Bangkok's flooding will be.

In Ayutthaya, Pathumwan said she took refuge in her niece's apartment with her husband and son Thursday after fleeing their own flooded home the same day.

As food and water supplies dwindled, they called a government emergency number repeatedly, she said, but nobody came until her family found a "friend of a friend" working directly with the rescue crews.

"This is the first time in my life I've seen flooding this massive," said Pathumwan, who was born in the sprawling town of ancient Buddhist pagodas about an hour's drive north of Bangkok. "It's a relief to be out ... because everybody's afraid it may get worse."

Earlier, the navy team had passed one man clinging nervously to a half-submerged traffic light, his cell phone and flip-flops in his hands just above water that filled the entire intersection.

For at least two kilometers (one mile) in the other direction — along a historic road lined with street lamps topped with gilded swans — the water levels ranged from neck deep to just under one-story high.

Hundreds of boats ply the newly formed waterways, some carrying away people desperate to leave, including the elderly and at least one pregnant woman. Others were filled with people hauling supplies back to homes they hoped to protect from looters.

Cars and motorcycles were submerged beneath the waves.

A Thai flag poked out of the waves from city hall. At the end of the road, a traffic light blinked red as a car alarm sounded.

A lone canoe paddled past the sprawling lake that was the courtyard of the city's white-columned tourist center, a hub for visitors to the area's Buddhist temples, treasured as a U.N. World Heritage Site. Authorities say 108 of the temples have been flooded, but there has been no word yet on whether the sturdy stone structures have suffered significant damage.

"Ayutthaya is uninhabitable now," said Santi Singharerk, a 42-year-old dentist carting away the single suitcase of clothes he was able to salvage from his home. "There's no running water. No electricity. We've lost everything."

Santi said he hoped to return in a month. "But it's going to take a lot longer than that for things to get back to normal."

Montri Rakthingerd, 45, criticized the government for the chaos.

"They warned people to evacuate. But they weren't prepared to evacuate people and they're not helping anybody when they do," he said. "Nobody knows where we

are supposed to go."

Montri said his home flooded Friday night and he fled when the water reached his chest. His refrigerator, motorcycle and washing machine were destroyed. On Tuesday, he returned to find everything that he had moved upstairs — two televisions, one stereo — stolen by thieves, according to his neighbor.

"Who can I complain to?" Montri asked. "Even the police station is under water."

A trio of Zodiac watercraft delivering canned sardines, rice and water to the city's main hospital was heckled on its way. "It's not fair, you never bring anything for us!" one man called out.

The government is helping, but relief officials are clearly overwhelmed.

At Ayutthaya's provincial headquarters, aid is also being delivered — meals cooked for hundreds of people at a time under a sea of tents. Inside, one official took call after call from desperate, trapped residents — two pregnant women needing to be evacuated.

Hundreds of vehicles were parked on the relatively safety of a highway overpass that dips into a flooded area, where vehicles can go no further. Here, the navy has created a makeshift ferry landing with a floating dock made of connectable blue plastic cubes.

Minutes after the pier was built on Tuesday, it was put to use: Rescue workers lifted a 94-year-old man in a wheelchair out of a gray Zodiac and rolled him to a waiting vehicle.

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Associated Press Writer Thanyarat Doksone contributed to this report.

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