

First a cyclone, now floods

As if a cyclone and a disastrous exercise in disaster relief were not enough, Myanmar has in the past week been hit by floods. From Kachin State in the north to Bago in the centre, the Ayeyarwaddy, Chindwin, Sittaung and Bago rivers among others have spilled over into towns, farmlands and villages.

The Chindwin, which flows down through Sagaing and meets the Ayeyarwaddy north of the Bagan historical zone, had late last week exceeded its danger level by almost a meter. The embankment at the town of Monywa has held, but over 20 adjacent villages and farmland have been submerged in up to 3 feet of water. Further south, parts of tourist town Nyaung U and surrounding villages were flooded, causing people to evacuate to monasteries and relatives' houses, and officials to relocate supplies of rice and foodstuffs from warehouses.

Flooding is common in the region, but according to a person who spoke to Radio Free Asia, this year it took people unawares as it does not usually occur until later in the rainy season. Government authorities had reportedly been going around recording details of damage but not assisting those affected.

Large areas of paddy have also been destroyed allegedly due to the bad planning of government officers. According to a number of reports, in Nyaunglaybin tens of thousands of acres of farmland may have been flooded because of inadequate drainage from an irrigation embankment on the south of the Sittaung River. Again, local officials reportedly came to assess the damage but made no arrangements for the farmers whose seedlings have drowned. Farmers speaking to news agencies said that the embankment had been built with their own labor but design faults had caused the water to be released too slowly and also to flow into fields, further exacerbating problems. One who spoke to the Democratic Voice of Burma said that they would need to be provided seedlings if they are to replant after the water has subsided, since under the township's direction they had contributed paddy for the delta relief efforts and don't have any left for a second planting.

There are already reports of businessmen close to the ruling generals grabbing land in the delta that farmers are not able to work this year or where there is no longer anyone left to cultivate it. As the state asserts a legal right to possess all land in Myanmar, it can transfer title deeds from one person to the next, or from a person to a company, if the former is unable to use it productively. Divisional authorities may find it in their interests to let some smallholders in flooded areas go bust and then do deals with the likes of Htoo Trading rather than helping the farmers out of their watery trouble. With everything that's still going on in the delta, nobody is likely to notice.