

The Great Flood of 2006: Residents of Luang Namtha flee to high ground

Luang Namtha
25 August 2006

One evening in late July 2006, an announcer came over the public address system loudspeakers telling residents residing near the Nam Tha to prepare to evacuate their homes. Water was being released from the Nam Tha dam above the town. The release might cause flooding along the banks. That day's hard rain washed logs and debris from the large rubber plantation clearings from surrounding mountainsides. The debris jammed the flood gates of the dam preventing the dam from releasing water, and the water had risen higher than the dam was designed to hold. Four of the lowest lying villages in the valley did not wait for the order to evacuate. Only the young men stayed behind to watch the village. Also at the Boat Landing Guest House the 20 plus guests chose to leave with their children for higher ground in the town. The river did not flood on this occasion. In the previous six years that the guest house has been open, the Nam Tha overflowed only for a few hours on 31 August 2000 but was only ankle deep.

In early August the Typhoon Prapiroon (named after the Tai rain god) moved across Hong Kong, southern China and northern Vietnam bringing high winds and driving rains. For days the tails of the typhoon lashed northern Laos with heavy saturating rain. On the night of 6 August the remnant of the main body of the storm moved over Luang Namtha bringing torrential rainstorms to every watershed of the upper Nam Tha. Long lengths of these watersheds had been cleared during the last dry season for the planting of rubber. Inadequate forest cover was left to sufficiently retain and slow down the rain water runoff.

Around midday of 7 August the five rivers of the valley, the Nam Thoun, Nam Hoi, Nam Leu, Nam Ngaen and the Nam Tha, began to rise quickly. The dam was once again shortly overwhelmed with debris and was unable to contain the flood waters. As the waters converged Route 3, the new China to Thailand highway, became a partial dam funneling the flood waters through the narrow channel under the bridge. Before the building of the road flood waters of the Tha River were able to broaden out and flow unhindered over adjacent rice paddies. On 7 August the waters backed up behind the bridge flooding homes in over ten villages in the valley. By early evening villagers were evacuating their homes for higher ground as were the guests of the Boat Landing Guest House.

During the evacuation, for which this time there was no announcement on the public loudspeakers, two people died trying to save possessions and livestock. There were also numerous incidents of petty theft and purse snatching. People fleeing on motorcycles in the dark had their bags pulled off their shoulders. Chickens, ducks and pigs found new owners.

At the Luang Namtha boat landing, the flood waters reached 1.75m in depth. The water reached its highest level in the early morning hours of 8 August and the river

finally returned to its banks by midday on 9 August. The area was submerged for over 36 hours.



Flood Waters at the Boat Landing Guest House 10 AM on 8 August 2006

In the memory of area residents the last flood of similar magnitude was in 1964. A log jam formed in rock outcroppings in the river across the narrow southern end of the valley damming the Nam Tha, near to where the new bridge is now located. After the flood water receded the rocks were blasted out of the river preventing flooding for the next 46 years.

On the 24th of August, once again the Boat Landing Guest House was again evacuated due to the rising waters of the Tha River. Several days of continuous rain on a landscape already saturated with water filled the river to the edge of its banks. This time the local population worked quickly to prepare for a flood. But this time the river stayed just within its banks.

The rainy season of 2006 is not over. In the coming weeks, the people of the Luang Namtha valley wonder if they will yet again have to leave their homes for the safety of higher ground. Even at this writing the river runs full with little room to spare.

The tropical depression which settled over northwestern Laos in the days leading up to the flood of 7 August 2006 is to blame for the flood. However, three activities done by man in the name of progress in the past years contributed heavily to the severity of the flood. The first was the building of the Nam Tha dam which does not have sufficient capacity to retain flood waters and must release them to avoid compromising the structural integrity of the dam. The second was the widespread clearing of forest for rubber tree plantations in all of the major watersheds of the upper Nam Tha. This destruction of the forest leaves rain waters unhindered to gush down barren slopes. The third was the building of the road across the southern, downstream, end of the valley and the filling in of the flood plain without any culverts or water outlets resulting in the funneling of flood waters under the bridge.

The questions that remain are: Are the aggravating factors of the flood well understood and recognized? Will anything be done to protect the remaining forest in the watersheds? Will anything be done to prevent future flooding as was done in the past?