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Burma

Agricultural Situation

Floods in Burma and Their Impact

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Report Highlights:

Flooding caused by heavy rains and cyclones in July and August generated havoc in many areas along some rivers in Burma. The Meteorology and Hydrology Department reported that the flood level hit the record high in 30 years. In addition to widespread damages on houses and infrastructure system in the country, the disaster reportedly wiped out 200,000 acres of cropland. Many believe that it was too late to replant the paddy in these affected areas as the monsoon rain was over in September. As a result, Burmese paddy production is forecast to drop significantly in MY 2004/05.

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Widespread Flooding in Burma

Heavy monsoon rains all over Burma in July and August flooded most of the low-lying areas in Irrawaddy, Bago and Mandalay Divisions. The Meteorology and Hydrology Department reported that the Irrawaddy River rose to the record high level in 30 years. Flooding caused a lot of physical damage in housing, infrastructures, clean water supply, and cropland:

- It was reported that some of the tourist sites in Mandalay (U Bein Bridge, Min-Kun Pagoda) were closed temporarily. As cars could not access to the Mandalay International Air port, several travel agencies needed to hire buses to transport the tourists to the airport.
- Daka Bridge near Kangyidaung was submerged under the floods. Flooding cut off roads connected between Irrawaddy and Rangoon division.
- ShweTaung Dam in ShweTaung Township, Western Bago Division cracked and water poured into the nearby areas and Shwetaung town. Affected areas also included Htonebo Township on the western part of Pyay, Kawa and Waw Townships on the Eastern side of Bago Division.
- Pantanaw Township of the Irrawaddy also suffered from flooding. Most of the wards and villages were submerged, except the town area. About 2,000 houses were destroyed and thousands of acres of farmland were wiped out.
- Heavy rains in the second week of July, coupled with the melting of snow from the mountains near Myitkyina, caused flash floods that swept away entire villages and livestock. According to the government surveys, the Irrawaddy river water level at Myitkyina reached at 1,046 centimeters, the second highest mark in 38 years.
- An official from the Myanmar Red Cross said people in Myitkyina had been evacuated to schools and monasteries in mid July, but the waters quickly receded. As floods moved downstream, residents were left with polluted wells, a dearth of clean drinking water, water-logged residences and high risk of water borne diseases. Evacuated farmers returned to find their homes in shambles and their paddy fields destroyed. Dr Daw Theingi Nyunt, consultant and Physician for infectious disease for Upper Burma, told Myanmar Times that the primary concern for all flood victims was an access to clean drinking water, as the fetid flood water resulted in food poisoning and infectious diseases.
- A representative from the Swiss Foundation for Development Co-operation or Swiss Aid said that the organization worked through local authorities and non-government groups to provide immediate assistance. Swiss Aid provided 100 bags of rice (5 metric tons of rice) to local authorities, supported the Metta Foundation in distributing food and household items, and funded the Kachin Baptist Convention's efforts to clean a dozen of wells. The representative said the aid organization, which does not normally engage in emergency relief operations, would continue to work with local community groups to provide support.
- Red Cross Society from Mandalay said that it had evacuated hundreds of people to relief camps and provided them clothes and mosquito nets. Myanma Red Cross (MRC) also provided ten thousand of sand bags to build flood prevention walls. Although the tide has subsided, certain quarters were still inundated. The mosquito menace and a shortage of drinking water were problems. World Vision, which conducted development projects in affected areas, initiated relief operations in Mandalay. It also provided rice and oral dehydration packets to residents and requested assistance from potential donors to assist 20,000 affected families.

Information on Flood Damage was Non-transparent

Information on the recent flood damage of the monsoon season did not disclose the full impact of the flooding in reports from the Burmese mass media. The Kyemon newspaper (run by the GBO) reported that there were no casualties or property damage from the floods in the Myitkyina area. However, local residents and NGOs assisting flood victims reported that several people died and thousand of houses were damaged. The Metta development Foundation, which promotes development project among ethnic groups, reported that about 50 people died and at least 5,000 houses were damaged in location around Myitkyina. The foundation reported that the German Catholic Bishops Organization for Development Cooperation, Swiss Aid, Medicins du Monde, Kachin Baptist Convention and other organizations were helping flood victims. Increased casualties were expected due to diarrhea and other illnesses.

According to the GOB-owned newspaper, "The New Light of Myanmar", as of August 18, 2004, the Directorate of Water Resources and Improvement of River System only notified the public that as the Irrawaddy and Chindwin Rivers were raging due to continued downpours, the agency had built navigational stations in many critical areas, including the Shwekyetyet, Myathalon Pagoda, Mya village in Pyay, Sakkawt, Ahtet Taloklat, and Amyintywa.

The Myanmar Times, government-affiliated weekly newspaper, dated August 23-29, 2004, was the only media that mentioned flood-caused havoc in Burma as river levels reached 30 years' high. It stated that the waters that submerged Myitkyina in Kachin Sate in July moved down stream into the Irrawaddy, Mandalay and Magway Divisions. Even so, it mentioned that there were neither devastation nor any casualties.

An official from the Department of Meterology and Hydrology reported that water levels at Pyay in Bago Division were still well above the danger point after reaching the second highest level in late July. Water levels at Magway fell below the danger point after reaching the record high level on July 31. Water levels at Hinthada in Irrawaddy Division also receded after hitting the highest point in seven years. The official stated that the fertile land surrounding the Irrawaddy in Upper Burma was subject to "yearly" onset flooding, which destroyed shoddily constructed homes, schools and other structures.

Private magazines refrained from mentioning the floods, fearing the backlash from the government. Nevertheless, news about donations and distribution of rice lunch packets to the flood victims in Sagaing Township, Sagaing Division and Thayet Township of Magwe Division were mentioned in Health Digest journal, a weekly publication, verifying the fact that townships in Sagaing/Magway Division also suffered from flooding.

Neither the MRC (Myanmar Red Cross) nor the government has sought outside funding for relief efforts. MRC officials claimed that residents whose paddy fields were destroyed would require long-term assistance. While the MRC and other organizations could comment on localized relief efforts, information about the scale of disaster and the extent of devastation was not released. Confirmed sources reported that a total number of 100,000 households were displaced by floods. They also anticipated that even jute plants, which are known as being flood-resistant, began rotting in their fields as the flooding was prolonged.

The New Light of Myanmar issue of August 30 reported that Lt. Gen Then Sein, the Secretary 2 of the State Peace and Development Council, visited the Barlar region at the border of Mingaladon, Helgu Township. Some farmlands in the Barlar region were inundated due to heavy rains. Lt. Col Myat Min, the Chairman of Rangoon North District Peace and Development Council, reported that the Rangoon Division Commander would promote the

replanting of paddy on the surfaced farmlands on a plot-by-plot basis after the water receded.

The Impact on the Main-Season Rice Crop and Others

Although many believe that the widespread flooding caused a lot of damage to the main wet rice season crop, the GOB stated that it was just seasonal flooding that routinely occurs as a four-year cycle.

Irrawaddy Division, the rice bowl of Burma, twice faced heavy floods, which continued for about nearly 20 days. The flood duration was so long that even jute plants, which normally withstand floods, could not survive either. Although the GOB-owned media reported about replanting on flooded farmlands, confirmed sources indicated that it was too late as the monsoon rains would be over in September. The replanted paddy crop will bear a very low productivity due to a lack of moisture at the grain-filling stage because October is usually the driest month of the year. The late seeded crop will be harvested in late January with less time to prepare for the second dry season crop, which is seeded from November to April and harvested from March to June. Due to these unusual phenomena, it is anticipated that there will be about a 20% to 30% shortfall in the dry season paddy acreage.

On the other hand, many farmers did not replant the main season paddy crop on their double-cropped farmlands, which got wiped out by floods, but instead would grow beans and pulses. Since these submerged farms lands were enriched with silt deposited by the floods, yields of the second bean and pulse crop are forecast to rise sharply in MY 2004/05.

Floods also wiped out many of farmers' houses and took their possessions, including their livestock and paddy/rice set aside for household consumption. Due to a lack of official figures of the GOB, it is difficult to estimate area destroyed by floods. Confidential sources said that flooding wiped out about 900,000 acres of farmland before August 2004. The crops affected by the floods were paddy, sesame, jute, sunflower, cotton, groundnut, maize, beans and pulses, and sugar cane. Among these, paddy, sesame and jute crops were most severely affected.

Farmers in general were making heavy efforts to replant the main wet season paddy damaged by the floods, but lack the means to buy the necessary inputs. Late replanting, shortage of quality seeds and necessary inputs will also affect the quality of the main wet season paddy. Confirmed sources estimated that the paddy production for MY 2004/05 should drop about 15 percent from the last season's level due to a decrease in harvested area and flooding-affected yields. Nevertheless, U Hla Kyaw, a director at the Department of Agricultural Planning, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation told Myanmar Times, dated October 18, that the main wet season paddy harvest may reach the last year's 18 million metric tons (887 million baskets) of paddy (un-milled rice).

Apart from the wet season paddy, the floods in Upper Burma especially in Monywa township of Sagaing Division also affected Matpe bean and corn. Corn was seriously damaged since it could not be replanted.

Domestic prices for paddy/rice should strengthen to some extent in 2005. However, the prices will not reach those in 2003 because the export ban on rice and paddy has generated high levels of current stocks held by traders and millers, totaling about 300,000 metric tons of rice. The GOB is likely to prolong the rice export policy ban for another year in 2005 due to fears that a shortage of domestic supplies may lead to social unrest. The GOB might opt to allow some amount of export sales to garner much-needed foreign exchanges. All export

sales are anticipated to belong to the government, although the GOB has earlier notified that selected entrepreneurial private enterprises are eligible to export the production from their private farms.

End of Report.