

NEWSNOTE

UNICEF mission to southern Lao PDR finds communities struggling after devastation caused by recent flooding

Vientiane, October 16, 2009: The trail of destruction left by typhoon Ketsana when it struck southern Laos on the night of September 30th is only now becoming fully apparent. Damage to road and telecommunication links caused by the floods that the storm triggered has hampered the efforts of relief workers and assessment teams trying to reach some of the more remote communities. Last week, following a Government appeal for international assistance, UNICEF staff accompanied a Ministry of Health mission to Attapeu province, where the flood damage was particularly severe.

When typhoon Ketsana began its lethal rampage across the Philippines and then through central Vietnam in late September, people living in the little community of Ban Sayphousy in the deep south of Lao PDR, followed its progress with interest, but little concern.

"We saw the news about the big storm on television," said 58-year old Mr Lam, a rice farmer like most in this village near the provincial town of Attapeu. "But we never believed that the damage it did in other countries could happen here."



Mr. Lam beside the remains of his house

Today, Mr Lam stands amid the splintered ruins of what used to be his home, and tries to come to terms with what he lost. "My house and all my belongings have gone, along with the rice harvest and my chickens," he says. "The floods took everything."

Mr Lam has moved in with his daughter who lives nearby with her husband and two children. Her two-storey brick house withstood the floods -- but only just: much of the outer wall was ripped away, taking many family possessions with it.

The floodwaters that struck Attapeu and other parts of southern Laos were as destructive as they were



Many children were forced to flee the floodwaters.

unexpected. On the night of September 30th, Ketsana tore in from the Vietnamese border to the east, and dumped huge quantities of rain on the mountains of southern Laos. In a matter of hours, water levels in the Sekong and other rivers rose with brutal suddenness to heights not seen in living memory.

By midday on October 1st, the Sekong river was a record 19.4 metres above its normal level. A flood plain extended up 10 kilometres on either bank, covering much of Samakisay, Sanamxay and Saysetta districts.

By the time a joint Ministry of Health and UNICEF mission arrived in the area, the waters had receded. But the destruction was readily visible. Some smaller communities were in ruins: wooden houses disintegrated or were wrenched from their foundations. The traditional stilt structures – adequate protection in normal monsoons – were no defense against the raging torrents. Even the walls of brick buildings had been torn open, buckling concrete beams and pillars.



Damaged house beside the Sekong River

Amid the ruins, families are carrying on as best they can. Mercifully, fatalities and injuries were remarkably few. But the experience was a terrifying one for many children especially, as they scrambled for the safety of higher ground to escape the surging floodwaters. Some people stayed in the densely forested hillside for two nights or more, often without shelter, food or clean water, and with little more than the clothes they were wearing.

Those who lost their homes are now sheltering with neighbours and relatives who still have theirs. But while most people now have a roof of sorts over their heads, water and sanitation are pressing concerns.



Dr. Nabouta from Ministry of Health inspects a village borehole

An assessment is underway to establish the condition of community water sources. Boreholes have been contaminated by floodwaters and need urgent repairs. Checking and rehabilitating the handpumps is a major task in which UNICEF will provide support to the National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Environmental Health (*NamSaat*). A smaller number of open wells will have to be pumped out and cleaned with disinfectant. UNICEF has already provided dewatering pumps and chlorine tablets for this purpose, along with insecticide-treated bed-nets (badly needed in conditions when mosquitoes can readily proliferate).

Meanwhile, many family latrines have been damaged and are no longer usable. This will force families to resort to open defecation – with the attendant risks to

public health. Community members encountered by the mission said they hoped to see more assistance for the construction of family toilets now that the floods have focused attention on the issue.

Food is in short supply: virtually everyone the mission met said the loss of their rice crop and animals was their biggest concern. Emergency supplies – provided by the government, international aid agencies, and private donors – is starting to arrive. But much more is needed, with the nutritional and health needs of young children a key priority.

Across Attapeu and the south in general, bridges and other vital infrastructure have suffered heavy damage. One wooden bridge carrying the main road to Sanamxay district had been patched up to allow people to hand-carry goods across the river. Only a handful of vehicles were prepared to risk crossing the rickety structure.



Along with the homes that had vanished or were left in ruins, many government facilities incurred heavy losses. Even in the provincial capital, computers, files and other material that had been moved to upper floors of government offices were still not spared the floods which reached up to 3 metres deep.



The mission visited several health centres that were miraculously providing services again, thanks to a speedy clean-up operation supported by Ministry of Health staff from Vientiane. However, at the Saysetta district hospital, the grey tidemark left by the floods could be clearly seen high on the wall above the beds.

Hospital ward in Saysetta district

In low-lying districts across the region, health centres have lost medical equipment – including refrigerators provided as part of a recent UNICEF-supported upgrading of the cold chain. Medicines and other supplies could be seen in sodden heaps piled outside the clinics.



Many old, wooden school buildings (often used for teaching lower grades) stood no chance amid the floodwaters. Newer school buildings were mainly unscathed but furniture and teaching materials will need replacing urgently before classes can resume.

Two weeks on, people in Attapeu and across other flood-hit areas of southern

Classrooms at Km3 primary school, Attapeu township

Laos are getting on with their lives again. Although these are among the poorest areas of the country, a strong community spirit has helped absorb the initial impact of the disaster.

Even so, it's clear that the floods have dealt a major blow to the socio-economic prospects of thousands of already-poor families, and pose a serious threat to public health. Meanwhile, the Government and its partners are left facing a daunting task of recovery and reconstruction.

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About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

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