

# Thai farmers ask spirits for rain to end crippling drought

By **Thanyarat Dokson**  
The Associated Press

**B**AN LUEAM, Thailand — Under the scorching sun, dozens of Thai villagers dressed in flowery shirts and traditional costumes parade a white cat caged in a bamboo-woven basket door-to-door and let neighbors splash water on the unlucky feline, while chanting an ancient tune: “Rain, rain, come pouring down. We barely had any this year. Without rain, our rice will die.”

It’s a desperate plea to the god of rain, in the belief it will hear the cat’s cry and answer the farmers’ prayers.

Thailand’s rainy season officially began in the last week of May, but it rained only once in the Ban Lueam district in northeastern Nakhon Ratchasima province. It is one of more than 250 districts — or nearly 20 percent of the country — that have been declared emergency disaster zones as the prolonged drought becomes the worst in decades, its impact felt most acutely by farmers growing Thailand’s most important agricultural export: rice.

At the beginning of July, the amount of usable water in major dams across the country — except in the west — dropped to below 10 percent, according to the Irrigation Department. The water level at Bhumibol Dam dropped to its lowest point in 51 years.

In the capital, Bangkok, the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority has slowed tap water production since May. The head of the authority, governor Thanasak Watanathana, told The Associated Press that without rains, the current water supply for daily consumption in Bangkok and its nearby provinces would last maybe only 30 days. However, he said forecasters are expecting rains in August.

For rice farmers, it may already be too late.

The drought and the critical water shortage in dams have prompted the Agriculture Ministry to ask farmers to hold off planting their crops. The Office of Agricultural Economics estimated that the delay could cost farmers in Thailand’s central plains alone 60 billion baht (\$1.8 billion) in potential losses.

“Every year in the past, in June and July, in every part of the country — the north, the central, or the northeast — farmers would have started planting their rice,” said Sompong Inthong, the permanent secretary at the Agriculture



Ministry. “The real damage will be with those who have already planted, but there’s not enough water. We have to look at how we can help them.”

The Royal Rainmaking and Agricultural Aviation Department sent a fleet of propeller aircraft on more than 3,000 flights since March to increase precipitation by cloud seeding, an artificial rainmaking technique spearheaded by King Bhumibol Adulyadej. Despite the high rate of success, it did little to fill the dams.

Together with Vietnam, Thailand is one of the world’s top rice exporters. But because of the drought, the Office of Agricultural Economics estimates this year’s main crop will decrease by 11 percent, or about 24 million tons, from the average of 27 million tons per year.

The Thai Rice Exporters Association says at least 3 million tons of off-season rice has disappeared from the stock since the beginning of the year due to the drought. The main concern, however, is the main farming cycle, which begins in May and is harvested as early as October.

“If the main crop’s produce is damaged, even 10 or 20 percent, it means the amount of rice will drop drastically,” said Chookiat Ophaswongse, the association’s honorary president. “If there’s still little rain from now, I’m afraid it will make quite an impact on next year’s export figures.”

He said that Thailand’s competitiveness against rival exporters, such as Vietnam, “which have less impact from the drought than Thailand, will be affected.”

Meteorologists from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and NASA say 2014 was the

hottest year on record since 1880, when the earth’s average surface temperature warmed by about 1.4° Fahrenheit (0.8° Celsius) — a trend that is largely driven by the increase in carbon dioxide and other human emissions into the planet’s atmosphere. The majority of that warming has occurred in the past three decades.

The reason involves El Niño, a warming of the tropical Pacific Ocean that affects weather worldwide. This year, NOAA says, El Niño has an 85 percent chance of lasting through winter 2015-2016.

In Ban Lueam, a drought-plagued rural district 211 miles northeast of Bangkok,

**DROUGHT DESPERATION.** Thai villagers parade through their village with a caged cat as part of ceremonies praying for rain in Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand. Under the scorching sun, dozens of Thai villagers dressed in flowery shirts and traditional costumes paraded the white cat caged in a bamboo-woven basket door-to-door and let neighbors splash water on the feline, while chanting an ancient tune: “Rain, rain, come pouring down. We barely had any this year. Without rain, our rice will die.” (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

several hundred farmers did not have any choice but to start growing their rice and hope for the rain.

Boonchan Thasunthorn, 58, recently finished plowing nearly 16 acres (6.5 hectares) of his rice farms by using a crumbling 16-year-old manual tractor. He said he would rather take risk by sowing the crops in the absence of rain than holding off until it was too late.

Boonchan’s village is outside the irrigation zone and the only access to natural water is the Chi River, which has nearly dried up.

“I’m just waiting for it to rain. ... If the drought continues, it’s going to be tough for me. But I can’t just sit here and do nothing, or else I’ll starve,” he said, adding that he still owed 100,000 baht (\$2,950) to the Bank of Agriculture for the equipment and maintenance costs for his farms.

“This drought has hit me the hardest, but I don’t know what else to do. Once you’re a farmer, it’s hard to be something else.”

## Cinemataya Independent Film Festival expands screenings for Asian films

MANILA, The Philippines (AP) — The Philippines’ leading independent film festival is adding a section showcasing Asian films, offering a venue for filmmakers facing censorship in other parts of Asia.

Organizers of the Cinemataya Independent Film Festival and Competition said the festival’s new “Independents: Asia” section will be opened by Zhang Yimou’s acclaimed *Coming Home* starring Chinese actress Gong Li.

Also to be shown are 10 award-winning films from China, Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, India, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.

The Philippines enjoys one of the freest independent film scenes in the region, so movies censored in other countries can be screened at the festival, said Laurice Guillen, president of the Cinemataya Foundation, which is mounting the festival for the 11th year. The film fest runs from August 7 to 15 in Manila.

“Those which cannot be shown in their own countries because of some kind of (censorship), you can show it here, because

we have the freedom,” Guillen told reporters.

She said as a modest start, Cinemataya invited Asian filmmakers to showcase their films for this year’s festival, but that hopefully a regional competition can evolve in the future. She didn’t name which Asian celebrities were invited to attend this year’s festival because they had not yet responded.

“While it has sought to nurture Filipino filmmakers through the yearly competitions, Cinemataya aims to inspire Asian filmmakers by showcasing the Philippines as the cinematic center of creativity and free artistic expression ...,” the organizers said in a statement.

Asian films to be screened this year — though not necessarily censored in their countries — include *The Ferry* and *Poet on a Business Trip* from China; *The Move* and *The Owners* from Kazakhstan; *The Monk* from Myanmar and the Czech Republic; *The Last Reel* from Cambodia; *Six Feet High* from India; *Summer Kyoto* and *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* from Japan; and *The Night of Silence* from Turkey.

Recreational marijuana use is legal in Oregon beginning July 1.

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