

Farmers battered by Thailand floods find a golden upside

By **Kaewewit Kaewjinda**
The Associated Press

BANG SAPHAN, Thailand — Nature regularly taunts the farmers of Thailand by flooding their fields, but this time she's tossed some of them a potential safety net: the chance to pan for gold.

Crops in Bang Saphan district, a rural community 150 miles south of Bangkok, were decimated by heavy flooding that affected much of southern Thailand in early January. The opportunity of villagers to eke out a meager living diminished further when the waters destroyed a local market.

Over generations, however, the villagers have learned to turn adversity into opportunity.

More than two dozen people were searching for gold along the local canal, called Klong Thong, or "Golden Canal." Many brought food and family along, as well as pans for sifting and small glass bottles to hold whatever they might be lucky enough to find.

"It is local knowledge that has been passed down through generations that whenever there is a flood and the waters have receded, locals will go searching for gold," said Boonyarit Daengraksa, deputy chief of Ron Thong sub-district, through which the canal runs. He said the floodwaters destroyed the sides of the canal,



GOLDEN CANAL. Locals pan for gold in the Klong Thong, or "Golden Canal," in Prachuap Khiri Khan province, southern Thailand. The canal, expanded by devastating flash floods, has washed up gold for villagers whose businesses were swept away. (AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit)

Pineapple farmer Samruay Kamlin, 59, said just the prospect of finding gold thrilled her. She only uncovered a few flakes, but obsesses over the hunt day and night.

"It is like a magic drug for me," she said. "I wake up at 3:00am thinking that I have to go look over here or there for gold."

Some, inevitably, are disappointed.

Local villager Yuang Padthong, 67, said she earned around 2,000 baht (\$57) a month cultivating coconuts, but since her crop and the local market were destroyed, she tried her hand in gold panning. She left empty-handed.

"There were more people here a few days ago and they were able to find a lot. There is a lot less to be found now," she said.

Still, community leaders want to trade on the area's golden reputation to develop it as a tourist site. Some small efforts were made in that direction, but lights and bamboo shelters erected before the recent storms were swept away in the floods.

Boonyarit said the local government will try to rebuild.

"It is important that we preserve this tradition that dates back generations," he said.

exposing potential deposits.

This is not a typical gold rush. Few if any of these part-time prospectors are counting on getting rich.

"We have nothing else to lose," said Nusra Tubtang, a 72-year-old pineapple farmer whose crop was mostly wiped out by the flood. "I come here to relieve stress."

Nusra said that in three days she was able to gather small particles of gold that she could sell for the equivalent of \$35.

Villagers commonly find small flakes of gold, and a few fortunate ones have come

across nuggets. In an exceptional case, a villager found a big nugget and made a \$1,000 sale to the chief of the subdistrict's administration.

"With a pan or a sieve, a shovel, and a can, and four to five hours, you probably could find some gold here that you can sell and earn at least 300 to 500 baht (about \$10 to \$15). Villagers can use this money to support themselves during this time of crisis," said Kritsada Muadnoi, a gold buyer and adviser to the local government. "We are lucky here that nature has compensated us for the disaster."

China's birthrate rises after one-child policy loosened

BEIJING (AP) — The number of births in China has risen nearly eight percent in the year after the government loosened its unpopular one-child policy.

China's National Health and Family Planning Commission said 17.86 million children were born last year, an increase of 1.31 million from 2015. Nearly half of the children born were to couples who already had a child, the commission said.

China enacted its one-child policy in 1979 to control population growth, enforced with fines and in some cases state-mandated abortions. But it now faces a rapidly aging workforce and the prospect of not having enough younger workers to support them.

It has gradually allowed more exemptions to the policy, such as allowing rural couples to have a second child if their first was a girl, before moving to let all married couples to have two children beginning in 2016.

The commission acknowledged that families remain reluctant to have a second child for financial reasons, with spiralling real estate costs and the intense demand for places in China's best schools driving many parents to high-priced private institutions.

An increase in births also places pressure on China's already strained health system for pregnant women. The commission said it would aim to train and hire 140,000 maternity health workers "in the coming years," according to state media reports.

Medals for 2020 Tokyo Olympics to be made of recycled metal

TOKYO (AP) — Organizers of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics say metal from discarded electronic devices will be used in the production of the medals that will be awarded to athletes.

Japanese citizens are being asked to give the organizing committee unwanted devices. Organizers say the program highlights the theme of sustainability and gives the whole nation a chance to participate in the preparations for the games.

The organizing committee aims to collect as much as eight tons of metal which, after the production process, will result in two tons, the amount needed to produce 5,000 Olympic and Paralympic medals.

Collection boxes will be set up throughout the country. The collection will end when the eight-ton target is reached.



RISING BIRTHRATE. A woman and a toddler ride a tricycle taxi on a street in Beijing. China's decision to change its one-child policy and allow all married couples to have two children is expected to contribute to the country's long-term economic growth and provide future relief for its graying population. (AP Photo/Andy Wong)

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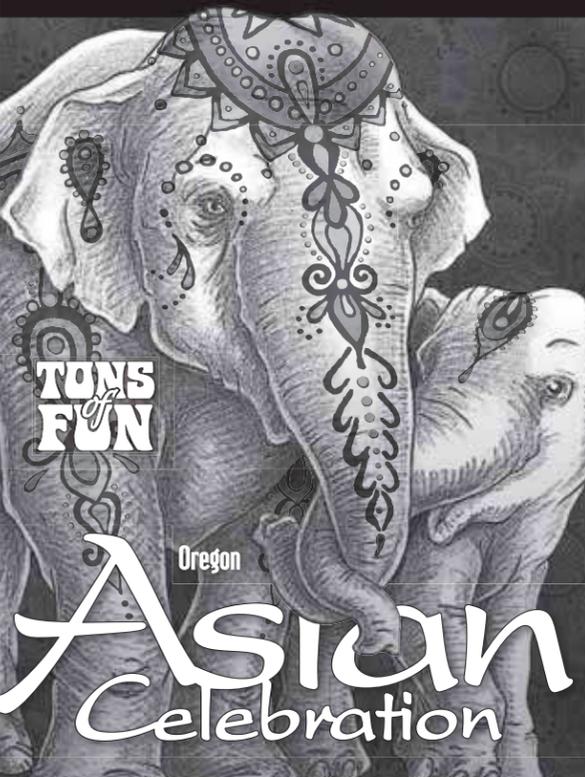


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