

Lao Flood Survivors Still Struggle, With Cash and Rice Support Now Cut Off or Reduced

'Now we have no money, no land to farm, and no homes to live in,' one survivor says.

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Some of the 700 permanent homes being built for flood survivors in Sanamxay district, Attapeu province, in Laos are shown in an undated photo.

Almost three years after a dam collapse that caused Laos' worst flooding in decades, most of the 3,600 survivors of the collapse are still living in shelters, with their cash and food allowances cut off or reduced since January, Lao sources say.

On July 23, 2018, water surged over a saddle dam in Attapeu province's Sanamxay district at the Xe Pian Xe Namnoy (PNPC) hydropower project following heavy rains, inundating 12 villages and killing at least 40 people in Attapeu and neighboring Champassak province.

Only around 111 families of survivors have now been moved into permanent homes—with 45 homes built by the Thai government and 66 built by Japan—and with monthly government support of 250,000 kip (\$25) and 20 kilograms of rice per person for all survivors ended or reduced in January 2021, sources in the country say.

"The chief of my village told us that our allowances have been cut off," a survivor living in Sanamxay district's Dong Bak Village resettlement camp told RFA in a recent interview.

"[But] late last year, a high-ranking official told us that our cash and rice subsidies would not be stopped until we had all moved into permanent homes and had some land to farm."

Local authorities should have told camp residents that their allowances would end beginning in January, the man said. "Instead, they kept us waiting and waiting in vain for our allowances for six months."

"Many of us are upset about this," he said.

Another Dong Bak camp resident confirmed they had never been informed of the coming cut-off.

"They're the ones who put us in this situation, and they're responsible for what happens to us now," he said.

"The authorities said they wouldn't cut off our support until we had all moved into permanent homes, but now the cash allowance has been stopped and the rice allowance has been cut back since January," a third Dong Bak villager said.

"Now we have no money, no land to farm, and no home to live in," he added.

Desperate for cash

Flood survivors living in Sanamxay's Thasengchanh Village resettlement camp are now so desperate for cash that they are selling the temporary shelters the government has given them and are moving into huts in the fields, some said.

“Because of the cut-off of support, I have no choice now but to sell my temporary metal shelter so that I can get some cash to make ends meet,” one villager said, adding that he had sold his shelter to a Vietnamese worker.

“In our Thasengchanh village, some families have no money because the cash allowance has been cut off and the rice allowance has been reduced,” another camp resident said.

So far, about seven families have sold their shelters for about 1.8 million kip (\$180) each and have moved to live in huts at their farms or in their rice fields,” the villager said, speaking like the others on condition of anonymity for reasons of personal safety.

“The village and district authorities told them not to sell the shelters, but they wouldn't listen,” he said.

'We're on our own now'

Also speaking to RFA, the Thasengchanh village chief said, “Now we're in trouble financially because the 250,000 kip cash allowance has been cut off, and the monthly 20 kilograms per-person allotment of rice has been cut off.”

“We're on our own now,” he said. “To survive, some of us have moved to live on our farms or in the rice fields to grow crops and wait for our permanent homes to be built.”

Ignoring the larger question of financial hardship, one Attapeu provincial official said that the temporary shelters are in any case now the villagers' own to sell.

“At first, we were planning to take the temporary metal shelters back once the survivors have moved into their permanent homes. But after discussing things with the dam developer, we decided that the survivors are allowed to keep their shelters.”

“They're theirs, so they can sell them,” he said.

Homes still being built

The construction of 700 permanent homes for the Xe Pian-Xe Namnoy Dam flood survivors is being financed by the company operating the dam, with 505 now being built, the Lao National Committee for Disaster Control said in a statement following

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a virtual meeting held on June 7.

Construction on the remaining 195 homes has not yet begun, but around 182 homes are expected to be finished by the end of the year, the committee said.

Laos has built dozens of hydropower dams on the Mekong and its tributaries, with plans to build scores more under a plan to become the “Battery of Southeast Asia” to export the electricity they generate to other countries in the region.

Though the Lao government sees power generation as a way to boost the country’s economy, the projects are controversial because of their environmental impact, displacement of villagers without adequate compensation, and questionable financial and power demand arrangements.

Reported by RFA’s Lao Service. Translated by Max Avary. Written in English by Richard Finney.