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Author(s)	Kitti Singapat.
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Disaster Broadcasting in Thailand

The following article deals with the writer's own experience in covering and broadcasting disasters in Thailand in the past 10 years.

What are disasters?

According to Webster's Dictionary, disaster is a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, or destruction. Hurricanes, tornadoes or earthquakes are among disasters that many people are familiar with. The sinking of the Titanic or the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma which claimed 168 lives are also considered to be disasters.

Calamitous events of smaller scales, such as fire with the loss of 5-6 lives, are considered tragedies not disasters.

Disasters in Thailand

Thailand is not located in an area prone to natural disasters, such as earthquakes or hurricanes. But Thailand did experience natural disasters of large scales. Laem Talumpuke in Nakhon Si Thammarat in southern Thailand was battered by a typhoon in 1962 while Prachuap Khiri Khan and Chumporn, two provinces in the south, were also devastated by typhoons in 1989. But the most frequent disasters visiting Thailand are seasonal floodings.

The series of disasters, both natural and man-made, that Thailand had experienced over the past few decades highlighted the lack of coordination among relief agencies concerned. Thai authorities came up with a solution by setting up a central body that incorporates several agencies concerned. The agency is known as National Safety Committee. The Interior Ministry also operates a relief unit called Civilian Disaster Prevention Division.

Broadcasting disasters in Thailand

It was only about a decade ago that Thai television began broadcasting disasters in earnest. The lack of modern broadcasting equipment and clear policy on the part of TV stations made disaster broadcasting secondary to other events.

It was not until the destruction brought on southern Thailand by Typhoon Gay did Thai television begin to see the importance of broadcasting such event live. But even then the broadcast was only intermittent and lacked depth. Disaster broadcasting in Thailand took an important turn with the collapse of Royal Plaza Hotel in Nakhon Ratchasima in northeastern Thailand in 1992 in which more than 100 people died. Practically, every TV station competed in terms of human resources, equipment and air time in covering one of the most tragic

disasters caused by men. They even played an important role in the rescue and relief efforts.

Problems and challenges

- 1) **Reporters** A considerable number of reporters still lack basic understanding of disaster broadcasting. It is not unusual for many reporters to cover disasters the way they normally report criminal cases -- depending heavily on police and Interior Ministry sources for information. Especially, when such disasters involve criminal aspects, these reporters would give priority to pursuing police investigations while neglecting their role in covering casualties or rescue efforts or sounding alarms over possible dangerous aftermaths.
- 2) **TV stations** There seems to be a lack of enthusiasm on the part of most TV stations in devoting enough air time -- especially during prime time -- for coverage of disasters. There are times when the lack of professionalism and experience result in confusions for families of victims.
- 3) **Relief agencies** In general, official Thai relief agencies still lack necessary experience in handling large-scale disasters. There is also often lack of coordination among these agencies. There have been incidents in which the responsibility of rescuing victims are left in the hand of private relief volunteers who often lack proper training.

Official relief agencies also do not see the necessity of recruiting the help of media in coordinating relief efforts.

- 4) **Future trend** As the Thai broadcasting industry develops, there is an encouraging trend that Thai television stations are attaching greater importance to covering disasters. Most TV stations now employ modern facilities to ensure prompt coverage of disasters and are more willing than before in devoting greater air time for such events.

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