

# Thailand

## GEOGRAPHY

Thailand is located in southeast Asia and covers an area of 14,000 square kilometres. The capital, Bangkok, is by far its largest city and is home to more than 10 million people. It is famous for its Buddhist temples and monuments, however the city is congested, with air pollution and subsidence (sinking land) being major ongoing concerns. Natural disasters, such as droughts in the northeast and floods in the central area, continue to fuel urban migration.

The country has four main geographic regions: the mountainous north, the dry northeast, the fertile central plain drained by the Chao Phraya River and the southern peninsula with its white sandy beaches. The climate is tropical, with hot humid conditions and monsoons half the year-round.

## PEOPLE

The official language is Thai with minority languages including Chinese, Malay, Khmer and Karen. Religion is an integral part of Thailand's culture. Almost 95 percent are Buddhists and a small percentage is Muslim and Christian. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) is revered by the majority of Thai people.

## HISTORY

The Khmers are believed to be Thailand's earliest inhabitants. The Khmers were overthrown in the 13th century when the Thais established their first kingdom, Siam. In 1939, Siam became Thailand, meaning "Land of the Free". Thailand is the only country in southeast Asia that has never been under European colonial rule – a fact that Thai people take great pride in.

The country experienced many coups and countercoups between 1932 and 1992. After 14 years of stable government, another coup in 2006 led to the removal of the Prime Minister before a civilian coalition government was formed after delayed elections. Thailand's King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) has served as head of state for 64 years and remains extremely influential. Born on 5 December 1927, his birthday is a day of national celebration.

Prolonged political protests in Bangkok in March to May 2010 led to the declaration of a state of emergency and an enforced curfew, as well as much violence. Bangkok has since returned to relative stability.

## ECONOMY

The 25 years leading up to 1997 saw a changing economy in Thailand. The once agriculture-based economy was modified and foreign investment led to the development of industrial and manufacturing sectors.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries  
The University of Texas at Austin

However, the 1997 Asian economic crisis devastated Thailand's economy, forcing the government to float the Thai currency (baht). With assistance from the International Monetary Fund, Thailand's economy eventually bounced back and became one of East Asia's best performers in 2002-2004. In late 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami hit Thailand and dramatically impacted the tourism sector. While tourism has recovered, investors remain concerned by political events since the military coup and the increase of tension in the south.

Rice is the chief crop, grown in upland fields or flooded paddy fields. Other products include cassava, rubber, corn, sugarcane, coconuts and soybeans. Major exports include computers, transistors, rice and clothing and are mostly sold to the United States, Japan and Singapore. Common import commodities include raw materials, consumer goods and fuel. In 2005, Thailand established a free trade agreement with Australia, which saw all tariffs removed on goods imported from Australia by 2010, increasing options for trade between both countries.

Over the last decade, falling agricultural prices have resulted in many rural people migrating to cities. In turn, more agricultural land has been taken over for industry, highways and housing.

With rice prices rising dramatically, some farmers have returned to farming. But for many more in the major cities, the cost of living has effectively doubled.

## LIVING CONDITIONS

Many Thais benefited from the years of economic growth. However nearly one-quarter of the population live under the national poverty line and the majority of these people are from rural areas.

Agriculture accounts for approximately 50 percent of the labour force. Many rural families struggle to make a living on small plots of land and are unaware they are often using outdated farming techniques that harm the land. Climate change and the resulting unpredictability of the seasons make it difficult for farmers to produce consistent rice yields. Many rural families still live in basic one-roomed homes made from bamboo or wood with thatched or tin roofs, and are built on stilts to keep cool and avoid flooding. These houses offer little protection from major floods or heavy monsoon rains.

Thailand is host to between 1.5 and 2 million migrants who have come from the poorer and often conflict-torn neighbouring countries. While Thailand's expanding economy relies heavily on migrant workers, there is little to protect migrants from trafficking or exploitation. This is particularly true for women and children coming from Myanmar. Internal migration within Thailand also remains a concern, especially for children and youth. The main tourist cities like Bangkok, Phuket and Pattaya are hotspots for sexual exploitation.

Thailand's response to a major HIV and AIDS epidemic during the early 1990s was hailed as a considerable success. However, further concerted efforts are still required to reduce infection rates.



Panee's was one of many families in her district assisted with farming training through World Vision. "I am able to care for my family, have enough income from the organic farming, my family is warm and I am no longer worried," she says.

## Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	THAILAND	AUSTRALIA
Population	68.1 million	21.5 million
Urban population (as % of total)	34%	89.1%
GNI per capita (US\$PPP)	\$8,001	\$38,692
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	98%	100%
Under five mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	14	6
Adult literacy rate	93.5%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	69.3 years	81.9 years
Adults living with HIV (% of total age 15-49)	1.4%	0.2%

Source: United Nations Development Programme  
Human Development Report 2010

## EDUCATION

Education is highly valued in Thailand, with high literacy rates among youths and adults. More than 90 percent of adults can read and write. However, children from the northern hill tribes are at a disadvantage because of language differences and access to schools. Children from poor families are often forced to do low-paying jobs, rather than go to school. These children are at risk of exploitation or being coerced into child labour.

Thailand faces the challenge of reducing the gap between the rich and poor, and coping with a dependence on imported fossil fuels. As with many southeast Asian countries, Thailand's inflation rate jumped to a 10-year high in early 2008, pushed up by the cost of fuel, food and services. These rising costs impact the rural poor, urban poor and migrants the most.

## WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN THAILAND

- Prevention of human trafficking and child protection are key priorities, especially in poorer and more remote border areas. While some activities work to prevent exploitation of migrant women and children, other programs address higher-level advocacy issues around migrant rights and protection.
- Through child sponsorship, many communities are benefitting from improvements in areas including healthcare, education, livelihood support and other basic needs.
- We work to educate farmers on modern agricultural techniques to increase productivity of crops, especially in the northeast region.
- Our response to emergencies such as droughts and floods includes distributing food, water and other essential supplies.
- Business training and access to small loans is provided for community members to help improve incomes.

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