



# EMERGENCY RESPONSE

The news that your transmitter site abroad is flooded is a nightmare for any broadcaster. When the BBC Asia relay station in Thailand was affected by severe flooding, support services company **VT Group**, which transmits BBC World Service, was able to come to the rescue – an exceptional effort which won them the “Professional Services” Award at this year’s BBC Global News Reith Awards.

**Margaret Keane**, Head of Customer Relations in VT’s Broadcast and Security Business gives the background

**V**T (now part of Babcock International Group) has been successfully delivering the BBC’s content to its global audience of 188 million since 1997, working in collaboration with the BBC to manage its current needs and plan together for the future.

The strength of VT’s partnership with the BBC World Service was seriously put to the test by the flooding in Thailand and the extreme circumstances demonstrated the strength of the relationship built between VT and the BBC.

Nigel Fry, Head of Distribution, BBC Global News, explained: “This was a great example of the way VT operates and the culture within its business in supporting our output.

“There was a very real risk of us

incurring significant costs if they had not contained the floodwater and stopped it from getting into the building. They just got on and did it. They obviously kept us up to date with what was happening but there was little we could do from London. What the guys on the ground did was an absolutely brilliant achievement.”

## REACHING TENS OF MILLIONS

The site, located in the Nakhon Sawan province in Northern Thailand, is owned by the BBC and operated by 29 VT staff. It transmits over 2,000 hours of BBC World Service radio content a month in multiple languages, (English, Bengali, Burmese, Afghan, Hindi, Indonesian, Mandarin, Urdu and Uzbek) reaching the BBC’s audiences of 40 million-plus across Asia, from the Caspian Sea to the Pacific Ocean.

The VT team operating the

facility faced a daunting challenge when heavy rains hit the Nakhon Sawan province. The Thai authorities were forced to divert the flood waters from dams in the north to protect the population of Bangkok and other urban areas.

However, as a result, the transmitting station was in the direct path of the diverted flood waters and desperate action was needed to protect the site and staff, with the building facing the prospect of major damage. Hundreds of tons of sand were packed into bags to protect site buildings and inside doors were sealed and additional barriers erected.



**RISING TIDE**

Once the flood waters began to rise there was nothing more staff could do as the site was breached and eventually the safety of the equipment was compromised. There was no alternative but to cease all broadcasts. Plans had already been made to find alternative ways to transmit in appropriate quality and the decision to close the site triggered the VT planned emergency response.

Within 30 minutes, all on-air transmissions had been placed at alternative VT transmitting stations and the VT Scheduling team also identified a long-term mitigation plan for the station's closure – initially predicted at a minimum of several days and then running to several weeks.

**REINFORCEMENTS**

Site staff even enlisted the help of the Thai army who worked with volunteer staff to reinforce the sand-bag wall, operate the pumps and control water ingress. Maintaining power to the building was essential to prevent on-going damage to equipment and buildings that could have incurred replacement costs running into millions of pounds.

Fortunately, the building stood secure until the waters subsided

and a clean-up plan was put in place, using local staff to ensure a cost-effective and efficient solution.

Subsequent work upgraded flood defences, including the re-design and re-laying of drains around the station to control any ingress of water better, strengthening the perimeter wall and raising the height of equipment in the antenna field. These actions will reduce the risks in the event of future flooding, enhancing the station's ability to remain on air.

**BEYOND THE CALL**

VT Group General Manager Communications John Prior explained: "Inspirational leadership and great teamwork avoided a potential disaster. Although there was a threat to the homes of many staff, they remained on site to lead the efforts there. If the water had entered the building, it would have affected the equipment. BBC transmissions from the site would have been off air for months and the financial costs of repair would have been enormous. The response of the staff was really beyond the call of duty."

In recognition of the help offered by local teams, VT and the BBC made financial and other aid donations including fresh water, canned foods, rice and sandbags to the local flood aid centre for

◀ **Main Image:** The BBC Thailand relay station under water  
**Above:** Rowing across the flooded site  
**Below:** The BBC Global News Reith Awards: from left Nigel Fry, Head of Distribution, BBC Global News; Sukanya Choophudsa, Admin Officer, VT Group; Annie Lennox; George Alagiah; Sukhontha Saisangtong; Senior Engineer, VT Group; Margaret Keane Head of Customer Relations, VT Group

distribution to the neighbouring population.

**EFFORTS REWARDED**

At the 2010 BBC Global News Reith Awards in London, which celebrate excellence, innovation and creativity, VT was recognised for its exceptional efforts, dedication and commitment in protecting the BBC Asia relay station in Thailand from severe flooding and maintaining transmission by winning the "Professional Services" Award.

This is not the only time that VT has triumphed at the Reith Awards. In 2009, VT jointly won, alongside the BBC World Services' Duty Operations Managers, the "Team of the Year – Professional and Support Services" Award, the first time an external supplier had triumphed at the event. ■



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