

Too little water, then too much

Worrying about La Nina floods as we bake under El Nino heat

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PETALING JAYA: It's ironic that Malaysians burning under the merciless El Nino heatwave that is drying up rivers and reservoirs will have to face possible monster floods at year end.

The latest data from a US climate agency said there was a 60% chance that El Nino "sibling" La Nina – which in Malaysia causes heavier than normal rainfall – will happen sometime from October to December (see graphic).

"We should be on the lookout from now, especially in areas prone to floods during the year-end northeast monsoon season," said climate expert Prof Datuk Dr Azizan Abu Samah.

El Nino, which means "the boy" in Spanish, is an irregular weather phenomenon that causes sea temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean to rise while La Nina, "the

girl" in Spanish, leads to a cooling of seawater.

La Nina often takes place after El Nino ends.

Both lead to unusually heavy rainfall in some parts of the world and drought elsewhere.

Dr Azizan, who is director of Universiti Malaya's National Antarctic Research Centre, said the 2014 year-end floods in the east coast of the peninsula, which were the worst in decades, occurred even when there was no La Nina.

As such, it was possible that severe flooding could take place if a strong La Nina happens this time.

He said US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) data indicated that the current El Nino phenomenon had already peaked.

Its severity this time was almost the same as in the 1997-1998 period when the previous extreme El Nino episode took place.

Dr Azizan said some parts in the

peninsula's east coast were flood prone due to improper drainage despite being very developed.

"Also, more rainfall does not necessarily mean bigger floods as it depends on where the rain falls. If much of the rain falls over the sea, it may not cause floods," he said.

Meteorological Department director-general Datuk Che Gayah Ismail, when contacted, said the department was closely monitoring the data but has not reached a conclusion yet.

She said there have been instances when El Nino or La Nina did not materialise despite 70% predictions that they would happen.

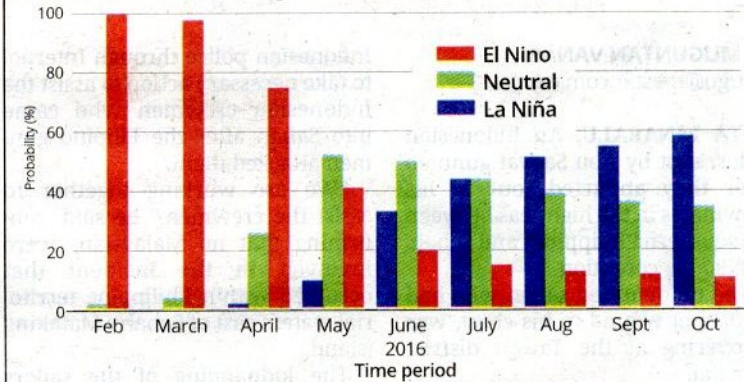
"We feel it is still too early to conclude that La Nina will take place," she added.



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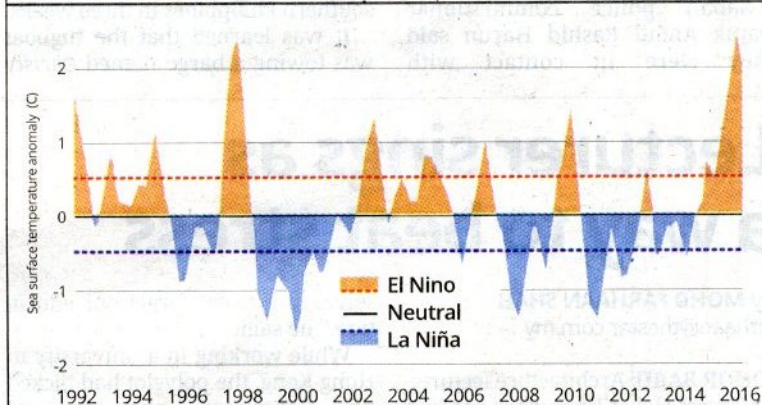
La Nina probability

Oceanic Nino index which measures El Nino and La Nina episodes



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

El Nino and La Nina episodes from 1992



Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration