

Third Annual Mekong Flood Forum  
Don Chan Palace Hotel  
Vientiane, Lao PDR  
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## **OPENING STATEMENT**

By

**H.E. Mr Sitaheng Rasphone**  
Vice-Minister of Agriculture and Forestry  
Vice-Chairman of Lao National Mekong Committee  
Member of the MRC Joint Committee for Lao PDR

**Mr Nico Bakker First Secretary of the Embassy of the Royal Government  
of the Netherlands**

**Your Excellency Mr Erwin Starnitsky, Ambassador Extraordinary and  
Plenipotentiary of the Federal Republic of Germany,**

**Mr Bill Berger OFDA adviser, Embassy of the United States of America**

*Excellencies,*

*Distinguished Delegates,*

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

As Chairman of the MRC Council for 2004/2005, I would like to express the Council's sincere thanks to all of you for attending this important 3rd Annual Mekong Flood Forum.

It is heartening to see so many distinguished delegates from so many countries that have spared their valuable time to gather together to discuss the difficult and important issues surrounding Flood Management and Mitigation in the Lower Mekong Basin.

I would like to welcome delegates from the MRC's member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam and our dialogue partners, Myanmar and the People's Republic of China.

I would particularly like to welcome those experts from Japan, Germany and France and Nepal who have travelled here to share with us their practical experiences of dealing with flood management in their own countries. We look forward to gaining new knowledge from your presentations.

On behalf of the Mekong River Commission Council I would also offer our gratitude to the Royal Government of the Netherlands, the Government of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Government of the United States of America for their generous sponsorship of this 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Mekong Flood Forum. Their action is indicative of the seriousness with which these nations view the threat of floods and their impact on the world's poorest people.

*Excellencies*

*Distinguished Delegates*

*Ladies and Gentlemen*

In 2001 the MRC Council approved an overall Flood Management and Mitigation Strategy, which set the stage for flood issues to become a major focus of the MRC's work. Today I am pleased to tell you that the new six-year Flood Management and Mitigation Programme has become one of our core programmes. This now makes MRC a focal point for trans-boundary flood management and mitigation activities in the region.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Mekong Flood Forum has special significance for the Mekong River Commission as it provides us with an ideal opportunity to launch the MRC's Flood Management and Mitigation Programme. This six-year programme is now funded and ready for full operation.

The FMMP is the first programme of its kind in the Lower Mekong Basin to operate on a regional basis. Our member nations of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam have spent the past few years working together to

formulate the components in a way that they will allow MRC and its partners to address vital trans-boundary issues.

This year we will witness the establishment of the new Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Centre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. It will be the first time such a permanent, regional centre has been established.

The development objective of the MRC Flood Management and Mitigation Programme is to prevent, minimise or mitigate people's suffering and economic losses due to floods, while preserving the environmental benefits. The objective is the key to a balanced approach to Flood Management and Mitigation and reinforces the region's commitment to "living with floods". This programme will also maintain an accurate flood forecasting system, to act as a facilitator on transboundary issues and build capacity in member countries.

Every year the Lower Mekong Basin experiences flooding which has the potential to adversely affect economic and human activity, often claiming lives and causing damage to important infrastructure human settlements and essential services. Whilst the regular flood cycle is seen as a source of livelihood, severe floods can have a devastating effect on the basin's efforts to improve economic development and reduce poverty.

In 2000 and 2001 the economic damage caused by severe flooding was estimated at many hundreds of millions of dollars. Worse still, the human toll was huge, with more than 1,000 people losing their lives, many of them children.

In the name of all people who suffer due to floods, I would like to offer here my sincere gratitude to all donors who are supporting the FMMP Programme.

As the population of the basin grows and pressure on the region's natural resources increases, the risk of large-scale economic and social damage is expected to rise. Human activity such as building roads, bridges and embankments, coupled with the drive to claim more land through filling drainage

channels, draining wetlands, clearing catchment areas and diverting rivers only serves to increase the risks of severe and flash floods.

To meet such regional objectives, it is not possible to work alone. Countries must join hands to coordinate their development programmes, to ensure that the efforts of one country do not have negative impacts on other parts of the basin. The MRC FMMP will play such an important role in future years in coordinating these transboundary issues.

MRC member countries are committed to managing the natural resources of the basin in a sustainable manner and for their mutual benefit. They recognise the need to conserve the beneficial economic and environmental impacts of floods. By adopting the principles defined in the FMMP they have agreed to an integrated approach to management and mitigation of Mekong River floods.

*Excellencies*

*Distinguished Delegates*

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Over the next two days we will hear presentations on disaster preparedness, early warning systems, forecasting tools, structural measures for flood proofing, capacity building and the economic value of floods. International experts will offer the benefit of their experience and the forum will conclude with a discussion on new areas of cooperation.

I am confident that over the next two days there will be useful discussions and the forum will conclude with concrete outcomes that will support the Flood Management and Mitigation Programme in meeting its goals.

I thank you for your attention and wish everyone a productive forum.