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MRC Council and donors meet in Phnom Penh



The Prime Minister of Cambodia, H.E. Samdech Hun Sen, opened the 10th Council meeting of the Mekong River Commission in Phnom Penh on Saturday, 29 November at the Intercontinental Hotel. The Council meeting, a two-day annual event, brought together Cabinet ministers from the four Mekong River Commission member countries to consider and approve plans for ongoing cooperation.

At the Council meeting, the Mekong region cabinet ministers approved a

US\$22-million, six-year programme for navigation development on the Mekong, and signed off a 3rd set of procedures on water utilization rules (see below). The support for navigation is expected to provide a boost to trade within the Mekong region.

In his opening speech to delegates, H.E. Samdech Hun Sen commended the Mekong River Commission for the quality of its information and the development of its information system.

The MRC Secretariat moves to Vientiane, Lao PDR, in June 2004.

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MRC Council and donors meet in Phnom Penh

Chairmanship of the MRC Council rotates annually and the MRC Council is chaired this year by the Cambodian Minister of Water Resources and Meteorology, H.E. Mr Lim Kean Hor.

Heading up the country delegations were the Minister for Environment H.E. Dr Mok Mareth for Cambodia, Minister to the Prime Minister's Office H.E. Mr Somphong Mongkhonvilay for Lao PDR, Vice-Minister of Natural Resources and Environment Dr Prinya Nutalaya for Thailand and Vice-Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development H.E. Dr Pham Hong Giang for Viet Nam. Observers from UN-ESCAP, UNDP, the ASEAN Secretariat, the Asian Development Bank and selected government departments also attended the two-day meeting.

Since the last Council meeting in Ho Chi Minh City a year ago, the MRC has received funding commitments of around US\$12.25 million, to be spent over a time frame of one to five years.

The MRC work programme for the year 2004 requires a total budget of US\$22.2 million. Almost three-quarters of this budget has been secured and the MRC is currently seeking another US\$5.6 million to cover the remaining cost of planned activities. A meeting with the MRC's Donor Consultative Group, representing over 15 international donors, was held back-to-back with the Council Meeting on Monday 1 December.

Two new procedures on water use signed

The Mekong River Commission member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam have agreed upon two sets of procedures regarding shared use of Mekong water: Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement, and Procedures for Water Use Monitoring. The sign-off took place at the close of the MRC's 10th Council meeting in Phnom Penh on 29-30 November.

The notification procedures require the member countries to alert each other on planned river developments that could significantly affect their neighbours, and to provide information regarding the developments, including technical specifications and environmental assessments. Last year, these procedures were agreed upon in a preliminary form.

The new agreements provide a definition of water use, covering uses of the Mekong "which may have a significant impact to the water quality or flows regime of the mainstream of the Mekong".

The new agreements confirm that uses of water on the Mekong tributaries will also be subject to notification and monitoring.

Professor Dr Prinya Nutalaya, Thai Vice-Minister for Natural Resources and the Environment, gave strong support to the water utilization rules in his opening speech, noting their "substantial progress".

The Procedures on Water Use Monitoring provide a legal basis for a water use monitoring system to be established in the Lower Mekong Basin.

A four-country grouping of technical experts known as TACT - the Technical Assistance and Coordination Team - established through the Mekong River Commission, will discuss and make technical recommendations on the system to the Joint Committee, the Mekong River Commission's executive body.

The new agreements pave the way for the countries to agree over the next two years on rules for the maintenance of flow on the mainstream and water quality guidelines.

The Water Utilisation Programme of the Mekong River Commission is supported by the Global Environment Facility through the World Bank over a seven-year period, to end in the year 2006.

LNMC: Managing the middle Mekong

Nearly all of Lao PDR's territory falls square in the middle of the Mekong River Basin. Its magnificent mountain scenery is prime watershed area for the whole basin - a gift of nature that demands a careful balancing act on the part of the Lao National Mekong Committee, tasked with the management of Mekong affairs since 1957.

In this land-locked country that ranks as one of the poorest Asian countries on the United Nation's Human Development Index, incomes are low and the average life expectancy is just 54 years. Access to primary health care is poor, with infant and under-5 mortality rates three times higher than the regional norm. The improvement of living standards is therefore of prime importance, said Mr Boriboun Sanasisane, Secretary-General of the LNMC. The Lao national agenda focuses on poverty alleviation and the challenging task of balancing development with conservation of natural resources. In terms of Mekong affairs, that means a high priority on road connections through the river basin, food security through agricultural production, and the sale of electricity as a main source of foreign exchange.

Most of Lao PDR is mountainous. Accordingly, hydropower generation has been a focus since 1950. "In the 1950s and '60s, we were thinking about information-gathering - acquiring the technical tools needed to identify projects for the national interest," recalled Mr Boriboun. The Nam Ngum dam, Lao PDR's first medium-scale hydropower project, was completed in 1968 and remains a symbol of Mekong cooperation from the early years. Irrigation, navigation, bank protection and flood control schemes were also prominent during this time.

In the later years of the 1970s and '80s,

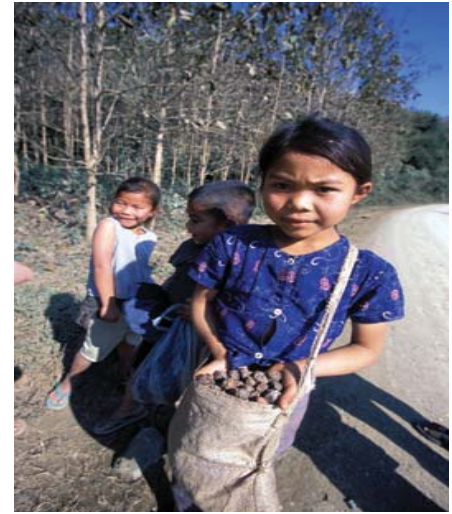


Prime watershed: Waterfall at Kwanxi in the hills near Luang Prabang

many feasibility studies were done for the proposed Pa Mong dam, but the member countries of the former Mekong Committee eventually agreed not to go ahead with this project on the mainstream. However, electricity generation on the tributaries of the Mekong remains important. Not only is it expected to be a main source of foreign exchange, electricity is seen as a means to grow agro-industry, building on the country's existing base of agricultural cultivation, and powering potential new mining developments. The LNMC is also investigating the possibility of "micro-hydro" dams that would have a generating capacity of 5 to 10 MW.

Other priorities for today are the in-depth study and management of agriculture, hydropower and fisheries - a recognition of the importance of the Mekong River Basin's natural resources. Forest cover is an important subject of study and watershed classification exercises have successfully identified prime areas for conservation and management. At present the LNMC is working closely with the Lao government's State Planning Committee and the line ministries to assist people in finding alternatives to shifting cultivation.

"More than 35 per cent of the water in the Mekong comes from Lao PDR," said Mr Boriboun. "So whatever we do, we have to look to the source."



Children collect seeds from teak trees to sell.

To do so, the LNMC is looking to expand the range of skills available within the committee to include new expertise on legal issues, economics and the environment. At present it has around 30 staff, of whom 70 per cent are engineers or have some other technical background. Most LNMC staff come from the line ministries. The committee maintains close working relationships with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Industry and Handicraft, the government's Science, Technology and Environment Agency and the Ministry of Communications, Post and Construction, which includes inland waterways.

Besides day-to-day cooperation with the Mekong River Commission on the running of its existing programmes, the LNMC has bilateral cooperation arrangements with various donors including UNDP and the governments of

LNMC: Managing the middle Mekong

Belgium, China, Korea, France and Japan. A river management advisor from Korea is currently serving the LNMC in preparing a national integrated water resources strategy and plan.

The committee is also poised to welcome the secretariat of the Mekong River Commission when it moves to Vientiane in May this year, expecting that this will reinvigorate the whole spectrum of working relationships. "The MRC is seen as a very important organisation for Lao PDR, since 97 per cent of the country falls within the Mekong River Basin," said Mr Boriboun. "It is a strong bridge linking donors with the local people, and Lao PDR with its neighbours."

Several priority sectors are identified for the committee's attention in the new year: agricultural development for food security and export; building of infrastructure including roads, dams and telecommunications; human resource development particularly in new technologies; poverty reduction; and environmental protection based on a balance between development and conservation efforts.

The Lao government, said Mr Boriboun, has always put a high priority on cooperation with the other Mekong states on use of the river basin. In conclusion, he reflected: "We don't have a big lake or wide rice fields. What we can hope for is to be the battery of the ASEAN power grid, and the crossroads of mainland Southeast Asia."

• This story on the LNMC is the third in a series featuring each of the National Mekong Committees in turn as the key coordinators of MRC activities in member countries.

Relocation well under way



New MRC Secretariat building in Vientiane, Lao PDR.

Moves to shift the Mekong River Commission Secretariat from Phnom Penh to Vientiane are now well under way according to the relocation "road map" approved by the Joint Committee in 2003. Recruitment and training of Lao support staff are in process, and the new building is in the final stages of being fitted out.

The MRC Secretariat's new home is a five-storey building overlooking a broad stretch of the Mekong as it flows through Lao PDR's capital city. On the ground floor will be staff training rooms and cafeteria, while the first floor will house a Documentation Centre open to the public. Most Secretariat functions and programmes will have their offices on the upper floors.

The new location is a strong symbol of regional cooperation. Thanks to its riverbank location, many offices will have a clear view of houses and shops on the opposite bank of the Mekong, in the Thai town of Nongkai.

Most office equipment will be shipped from Phnom Penh, with some additional requirements being covered through

a generous grant from the Thai National Mekong Committee. The Korean government is providing US\$50,000 worth of computer equipment, while the Vietnamese government is assisting with a grant for completion of the building.

Most professional staff will make the move from Phnom Penh to Vientiane in late May 2004.

Cambodian administrative staff have been adapting to the change process. Some will travel to Vientiane to be part of a one-year handover to new Lao staff, while a number will move on to the new MRC Flood Centre in Phnom Penh or to jobs with other international agencies. A small number of staff will not be able to relocate and the Secretariat is assisting with job placement through liaison with other agencies.

New Lao administrative staff are being recruited and trained. The first batch began training in December 2003 in Vientiane. Training costs are being covered by the UNDP mission in Lao PDR.

MRC Events

Asking "what-if" questions



Course participants at the Nam Ngum hydropower dam

How might construction of dams affect the Mekong fishery? If irrigation increases, what changes in water quality can be expected? And what impacts would population growth have on demand for water?

Participants in a 4-day training course in Vientiane last December examined these and other questions aimed at viewing the Mekong River Basin as a system. They also trained in the use of the Mekong River Commission's new decision-support framework (DSF), a computer simulation package used to predict impacts of different planning decisions.

One challenge for basin development planning in the region will be the ability of decision-makers to bring together information about proposed and planned developments in targeted border areas. The training course, held from 8 to 12 December 2003, was the third in a series of AusAID-funded support for the Mekong River Commission's basin development planning process, resourced by experts from the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) in Australia.

The 26 course participants from National Mekong Committees in the four member countries and the MRC Secretariat learned how to use the DSF and the recently completed MRC Population and Environment Atlas to find out answers to "what-if" questions on the potential impacts of population growth, hydropower development and increases in irrigated agricultural areas.

They also learned how to construct scenarios as inputs into the decision-support framework and to interpret the outputs, analysing relationships between water flow and people, and between water flow and the environment.

A visit to the nearby Nam Ngum hydropower scheme brought the issues to life as a senior staff member briefed participants on the operating rules for the hydropower plant - essential to understanding its likely downstream impact. Later, lakeside villagers talked with them about the capture fishery and aquaculture at Nam Ngum reservoir.

Many participants had not had the opportunity to travel within their own river basin and affirmed that they would return with a better mental picture of the basin's resources and people. The fourth training module in this series, planned for May-June 2004, will be a tour of the basin focusing on understanding the link between its natural resources and people's livelihoods.

Mekong Spirit enters Water Festival

Staff from the MRC Secretariat and its partners successfully completed the course in the Water Festival boat races this year. A multi-national crew from Cambodia, Thailand, Denmark, Australia, Germany, France, Canada and the United Kingdom entered the Phnom Penh Water Festival races this year with their purpose-built dragon boat, the Mekong Spirit.

Brightly decorated boats, crewed by teams of rowers, compete in the Water Festival races in Phnom Penh every year. The Mekong Spirit was the only boat this year to field an international team.

A capsizing incident during one of the team's practice runs on the Bassac led to a new dragon boat being designed to accommodate the larger foreigners, who were, as one of them noted, "being beaten by schoolboys."

While they didn't win, the 26-member crew claimed it as a victory for Mekong cooperation. Said team captain Hang Chhaya to the Phnom Penh Post, "Our initial aim was, of course, not to sink."

Given that, the fun, festivities and overall team-building were a bonus, and the team plans to take the Mekong Spirit to the races again in 2004.



\$10 million for Mekong research on water and food



Growing vegetables on banks and sand bars of Mekong River .

Eight separate projects focusing on agricultural productivity and efficiency of water use in the Mekong region have received funding to the value of US\$10 million through the Challenge Programme, a global research programme targeting important river basins around the world. Another three projects have been approved subject to the availability of funds.

The winning submissions came from a range of CGIAR centres (the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research), the University of Chiang Mai and the Water Utilisation Programme of the Mekong River Commission.

Launched in Nairobi last year, the Challenge Programme is a global research programme spread across nine major river basins in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America. The river basins serve as living laboratories where the impacts of development can be clearly measured. Each basin has its own set of problems. In the Mekong River Basin, the challenge is how to achieve

sustainable agricultural, fisheries and economic development, while alleviating poverty and preserving the unique environment and biodiversity of the basin.

Agriculture currently consumes 90 per cent of all water use in the Mekong River Basin. Rice cultivation is the most important agricultural activity in the Lower Mekong Basin, for physical, biological, social and economic reasons. However, rice-growing consumes a great deal of water. To produce one kilogram of rice requires three to five thousand litres of water, depending on the rice variety and type of irrigation used.

While there is plenty of water in the Mekong, water use for agriculture is rising in tandem with government policies throughout the basin favouring expansion or improvements to irrigation facilities. Water is likely to become scarce during the critical dry-season period of February to May. In the Mekong Delta, saltwater intrusion and acidic flows during the dry season are already a major problem.

The Mekong projects funded through the Challenge Programme will study a wide range of topics related to food production and water use. Landscaping of rice fields to promote water use efficiency, development of salt-tolerant rice varieties and other crops, and fish culture in seasonal floodwaters are among the areas identified for action.

Submissions for funding were coordinated by the Mekong River Commission through its network of partners in river basin management.



Starting the engine on a walking tractor.

Southeast Asian water plans target poorest users



Southeast Asia's rice irrigation systems should be updated, and its rich fishing grounds protected through better management, said delegates at the close of the region's First Southeast Asia Water Forum. These moves are expected to help solve poverty and food insecurity, the most pressing water issues for the region.

Over 500 people from SE Asian government agencies, universities, NGOs and private water sector management bodies attended the four-day forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 17 to 21 November 2003.

Delegates called for better service for the poorest water users in particular, including farmers who depend on outdated and wasteful irrigation systems, and slum dwellers paying high prices to private water sellers. In the Mekong region, agricultural irrigation accounts for 90 per cent of all water use, compared with 70 to 80 per cent in other parts of the world. Access to clean drinking water is still limited in many areas; for example, in Lao provincial towns, only 18 per cent of people receive a piped water service.

The Forum identified nine priority areas for action, including increasing the efficiency of water use, establishing legal frameworks and guidelines for water allocation, and more involvement of water users, particularly women, in decision-making.

The Forum also endorsed a new Water and Climate Alliance, a coalition of groups that will cooperate to seek finance for floods and scientific drought research to predict and monitor the water cycle.

These priorities accord with activities already under way at the Mekong River Commission. A US\$20 million Flood Management Programme is now in its start-up phase, while agriculture and water use efficiency are the focus of research being commissioned through the Challenge Programme (above).

The Forum provides a boost for countries to meet the target set in the Johannesburg World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) in September 2002, to prepare national plans for integrated water resources management and water efficiency by 2005.

The four-day conference in Chiang Mai drew well over 400 delegates - almost twice the expected number - including many internationally-recognised speakers including senior government

officials, experts from United Nations agencies, advisors, researchers and campaigners on water issues. It was hosted by the Global Water Partnership's Southeast Asia Technical Advisory Committee.

The conference is a follow-up from the 3rd World Water Forum that was held in Kyoto, Japan in March 2003, which produced over 100 commitments to action on water issues.

Fine art of peace-building

Delegates to the Southeast Asia Water Forum in Chiang Mai discussed ways to resolve disputes on water issues, in sessions held over two days. The sessions on "Conflict resolution and river basin organisations", convened by the Mekong River Commission, sparked lively discussion between regional and international experts, government officials and NGO workers. Speakers presented a number of case studies focusing on (among others) the South China Sea, the Pak Mun and the Cuu Long Delta. The MRC's role as a regional river basin organisation came under scrutiny - and general affirmation - as structures and processes for resolution of real-life water issues were discussed.

Detailed conference outcomes are posted on-line at www.gwpseatac.ait.ac.th

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