

MekongForum

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December 28, 1999

The Honorable Yamaha Suto *and* Members of Distribution List
Mekong River Commission Secretariat
P.O. Box 1112
364 M.V. Preah Monivong
Sangkat Phsar Doerm Thkouv, Khan Chamkar Mon
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

Subject: **The Mekong River Basin in the 21st Century**

Dear Mr. Suto,

The MekongForum and The Vietnamese Science and Technology Society wish to present you The 1999 Mekong Papers which contain "**The 1999 Mekong River Declaration**" and a number of supporting articles written by scientists, engineers, and economists familiar with the historical and recent development of the Mekong River Basin.

The 1999 Mekong Papers include:

- ◆ **The 1999 Mekong River Declaration**
- ◆ **The Importance of the Mekong River to The Cambodian People**
- ◆ **The Existing Challenges and Future Dangers to the Tonle Sap and the Mekong Delta**
- ◆ **POWER STRUGGLE: The Impacts of Hydro-Development in Laos**
- ◆ **Vietnam and the Development of the Mekong**

The 1999 Mekong River Declaration is the product of an international conference held by MekongForum and VAST in California last May. This Declaration has garnered the enthusiastic endorsement of the scientific communities, the natives people of Cambodia and Vietnam, the Australian Vietnamese Science and Technology Link, the International River Network and Both ENDS.

The 1999 Mekong Papers expressed the Conference attendees concerns on the serious impacts of Mekong development projects on this pristine environmental resource and the fragile food security of the millions Mekong farmers and fishermen. We urge you to take all necessary actions to protect the biodiversity of the region and the vital interest of the 100 million people living in the Mekong River Basin.

Respectfully,



Dr. Tran Tan Phat
President
MekongForum



Dr. Mai Thanh Tuyet
President
Vietnamese American Science and Technology Society

The 1999 Mekong River Declaration

Safeguarding the Mekong River, Her Delta, and Her People

The Mekong River, the world's 11th longest river, is also the world's 2nd most biodiverse river. Fed by the melting snows of the Tibetan Himalayas and monsoon rains of Southeast Asia, the 4200 km Mekong is home to thousands of rare and endangered species of plants and animals. The main river and her countless tributaries nourish and support over 100 million people from China in the north to Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and finally to the millions living in Vietnam's Mekong Delta region.

The fish in the Tonle Sap Lake, UNESCO's Biosphere Reserve, and the Mekong represent the source of 80% protein for millions of Cambodian and Vietnamese living there. The Delta, Vietnam's "rice bowl" and its crops are feeding and sustaining the people of many nations, making Vietnam the second largest rice exporting country in the world. Today, the Tonle Sap Lake and the Delta region, and all those residing in the Mekong Basin are threatened by the reckless development and misuse of this great river and her waters. The new threats are far greater than any drought or flood in their history of existence.

Water diversion and development projects along the Mekong River and her tributaries threaten not only to the Delta inhabitants' way of life, fisheries and agriculture, but also to the river and Delta ecosystems. Scientists and engineers around the world are concerned by the environmental damage to the Delta caused by development projects far upstream. These projects include large-scale hydropower developments in Yunnan [China] and Laos, along with the massive Mekong water diversion projects proposed by Thailand. The economic costs and environmental consequences of the projects, however, are being borne most heavily by those living and farming farther downstream in the Mekong Delta. These people have no voice in these project decision making process, reap no benefit from these projects and bear the greatest burden of their impacts.

Alarm bells are now ringing in the Tonle Sap Lake and the Delta. The fish catch in the Tonle Sap Lake in recent years has decreased by 50%. In November 1998, the annual flood needed by the Delta farmers to control soil acidity and saltwater intrusion did not arrive. The water level at Tan Chau monitoring station, at the end of the 1998 rain season, fell to a 73-year record. Accompanying the drastic reduction in Mekong water levels are similar reductions in fishing harvests and loss of the Mekong's nutrient-rich river sediments which are essential for rice farming and crucial for erosion control. The water table in the delta is now falling due to the shortage of river water available to recharge the aquifer. Saltwater has invaded up to 70 km into the Mekong delta, threatening to contaminate existing ground water supplies and rendering million of hectares of farmland unproductive.

Existing and proposed water-diversion and hydropower dam projects will alter the Mekong Basin's hydrologic cycle permanently. Upstream, thousands of square kilometers of critical forest could be inundated due to reservoirs. Downstream, the floodplain's croplands could be deprived of the water and fertile silt supplied by the annual floods. Some 100,000 people could be displaced. Experts around the world have established that if one robs a river of its waters and alters its natural cycles, that river will die.

The fisheries, the agriculture and environment richness of the Tonle Sap Lake, and the Mekong Delta must be protected on behalf of all the people of Southeast Asia. The Mekong river - the world's last remaining major unobstructed riverine ecosystem must be preserved and the food security of 100 million poor people should be safeguarded.

We urge action now to safeguard the Mekong River ecosystem and her people and submit this to:

The governments of China, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam
The United Nations Development Program and The Mekong River Commission
The World Bank
The Asian Development Bank
Donor Countries and International Aid Agencies
Multinational Corporations and Investors

We call upon all national and international agencies, policymakers, and residents of the Mekong Basin and Delta region to observe and uphold these principles for responsible development of the Mekong River Basin:

1. That a moratorium be imposed immediately against further Mekong water-diversion, damming, and hydropower projects, the top priority for national and international agencies should be the development of scientific baseline data on the Mekong, its hydrology, and its ecosystems.
2. That a comprehensive environmental impact assessment will be required for all Mekong projects and an environmental management system in compliance with ISO 14000 series will be required from all Mekong projects developers. The EIA's shall be carried out by independent and qualified scientists, free from any conflict of interest.
3. That all Mekong development and diversion projects, regardless of their sources of finance and ownership, must honor and grant the "right to be educated" along with "the right to know" for all affected populations. Affected populations must be provided with adequate information and knowledge necessary to understand the project's design, review the costs and benefits, and assess for themselves the long-term impacts of the project.
4. That all affected populations throughout the basin, without regard to national borders, have the right to participate in any project's "go or no go" decision.
5. That all agencies and authorities conduct their business on the principles of transparency and full disclosure, that all development plans, agreements, environmental baseline data, environmental impact assessment reports, feasibility studies be made public and available for review by the international scientific community, non-governmental organizations, and by individual private citizens.
6. That the development of all policies and decisions, project, and rules and regulations of the Mekong River Commission and all member nation agencies shall include a public participation program with guaranteed freedom of expression and freedom of the press.
7. That developers, owners and development agencies be held responsible for all planned and unplanned environmental losses and damages caused by their projects and for the losses inflicted on properties, people's income and livelihood.
8. That the four Lower Mekong nations: Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam modify the 1995 agreement to closely follow the language of the United Nations' Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses of 1997; and that China and Myanmar join the above four lower Mekong countries, and together negotiate an agreement for the development and protection of the Mekong in the 21st Century.

Considered and Adopted at:

The 1999 Conference on The Mekong River at Risk
The Impact of Development on the River, her Delta, and her People

and Endorsed by:

The United Hometown Associations of Tien Giang and Hau Giang
The Cambodian Association of America
International Rivers Network
Both ENDS
The Australian-Vietnamese Science and Technology Link
The Vietnamese American Science and Technology Society
The MekongForum