

Contents

- ◆ MRC Secretariat to relocate
- ◆ Healthy rivers, good food
- ◆ Reflections on a four-year term
- ◆ Mekong issues at Water Forum
- ◆ New atlas launched
- ◆ New information products
- ◆ Forecasts for flood-prone villages
- ◆ Water for Peace in Southeast Asia
- ◆ Research for real-life river basins
- ◆ The water came up to here . . .



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MRC Secretariat to relocate



Signing of Headquarters Agreement in Vientiane, 14 June 2003

The Mekong River Commission Secretariat will move from its current location in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to Vientiane, the capital of Lao PDR, by June 2004.

The move was announced by the MRC's executive body, the Joint Committee, at the close of its 17th Meeting in Phnom Penh on 7 June. The decision was formalised on 14 June in Vientiane in a signing ceremony with the MRC Council, the organisation's Ministerial-level ruling body.

The decision and timeline for relocation reflects over a year of planning and negotiation for a process that will keep impacts on work routines and programme implementation to a minimum. The move will empty the four-storey building on Monivong Boulevard in Phnom Penh that currently provides a base for around 125 staff, and will fill a new purpose-built centre on the banks of the Mekong in Vientiane.



The Secretariat was first located in Bangkok, at the home of the former Mekong Committee which was established there in 1957. A new agreement between the member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam in 1995 created the Mekong River Commission in its present form. The Secretariat moved to Phnom Penh in 1998.

MRCS to relocate...

The agreement now confirms the direction that was set before the move to Phnom Penh, when the four member countries agreed that the Secretariat would rotate between the two countries with capitals located within the river basin, Cambodia and Lao PDR.

The MRC consists of three permanent bodies: a Council comprising one cabinet minister from each member country, the Joint Committee comprising senior government officials, and the Secretariat, which employs over 125 staff.

In signing the new Headquarters agreement on 14 June, H.E. Asang Laoly, Deputy Prime Minister of Lao PDR, commended the changes within the Mekong River Commission in recent years, saying, "It is now a more and more developed intergovernmental body that stands on a sound financial footing and solid technical skills and has the support of the donor community, thus ensuring the betterment of the living conditions of the people of the Mekong." He also spoke of "the transformation of the Mekong River into a river of peace and cooperation among the riparian countries and the countries in the region."

The MRC is funded by contributions from its member countries and from aid donors, with total operating costs of US\$12 to \$15 million a year.

Healthy rivers, good food



Peter Degen

Two important international conferences this year have highlighted the importance of rivers in ensuring food security.

At the 2nd International Large Rivers Symposium (LARS2) in Phnom Penh in February, over 200 scientists from all over the world called for the improved valuation of the contribution of rivers to food production.

The declaration from the four-day LARS2 Symposium noted that inland fisheries were "generally undervalued" in terms of their contribution to food security, income generation and the functioning of ecosystems. Recent evidence shows that the number of people who use rivers for food and recreation is much higher than previously thought. Studies also show that fish are particularly important to the livelihoods and diets of the poor, providing a cheap source of animal protein and essential nutrients not available elsewhere.

The role of rivers in food security is particularly important in a region such as the Mekong, where many of the population live very close to the poverty line.

In a call for concerted action, the LARS2 participants warned that maintaining

healthy rivers "will only be achieved if there is political will at all levels of society...The fisheries sector must not continue in isolation, but must communicate clearly with the public and other users of inland water resources in order to arrive at equitable solutions for sustaining the fishery."

The LARS2 statement was timely. Through the Mekong River Commission's delegation to the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto in March, the statement fed into the drafting process for the Forum's Ministerial Declaration.

At the close of the Kyoto Forum, which 12,000 people attended, ministers from around the world agreed in a joint declaration that inland fisheries are indeed a "major source" of food, and that "Freshwater fish production should be addressed through intensified efforts to improve water quality and quantity in rivers and protection or restoration of breeding areas."

The Ministerial Declaration represents the first time that freshwater fish production has been addressed in a document of this kind - signalling, hopefully, a healthy trend for those most dependent on the living resources of the Mekong and its tributaries.

Reflections on a four-year term

The Mekong River Commission's Chief Executive Officer, Mr Joern Kristensen, completes a four-year term at the end of September this year. As the Secretariat is poised to enter a new stage, he reflects on changes he has seen, and the outlook for Mekong river basin cooperation.



Q: Mr Kristensen, looking back over your four-year term, what are the biggest changes that you have observed in the four-country partnership?

A: I have seen the four member countries and their representatives taking on a much stronger ownership of the Mekong cooperation and thereby of the Commission and its Secretariat than just a few years ago. They are now working together on basin-wide issues such as formulating rules for equitable use of the Mekong water, they are creating the first regionally-owned development plan for the Mekong Basin, the so-called Basin Development Plan, and they have taken steps to develop tools so that proper Environmental Impact Assessments can be carried out on a regional basis to ensure that development activities in one country will not harm downstream neighbours.

This change of direction in the work of the Commission that was introduced with our new programme approach in 2000, effectively marked an end to the period where MRC and its predecessor the Mekong Committee primarily was engaged in numerous small-scale, scattered research and development projects that were often more national than regional in scope. It marked the beginning of the four countries working together in the true meaning of international river basin management as clearly prescribed in the far-reaching Agreement on the Cooperation for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong river Basin that they signed in 1995. It is challenging and at times both difficult and sensitive as it requires that those representing their country are willing to make compromises, even sacrifices. In international cooperation nobody can get everything they want. That is also what the Mekong cooperation is about.

Q: Similarly, what are the greatest changes that you have seen take place at the Secretariat?

A: For organisations like MRC, engaged in scientific research, analytical work, development planning and advisory service, the quality and capacity of the staff are the backbone of its success. Since 1999 the staff of the Secretariat has increased by about 50 per cent and now are of 15 different nationalities. Through agreements reached in 2000 with the four member countries and donors, the Secretariat now recruits its own staff, rather than accept secondments. We have been able to bring together a very talented group of regional and international experts, supported by well-trained and highly motivated Cambodian support staff, with successful integration of external consultants that are hired to provide specialist input to our work. I am very proud of them and of the results that they have produced through their dedication and hard work.

Q: What, in your view, has Cambodia gained from the hosting of the Secretariat over the last 4 to 5 years?

A: Remember that when the Secretariat moved here from Bangkok, Cambodia was still in the process of emerging from a turbulent and tragic period in its history. To end years of isolation, the Government was aiming at normalizing relationships with its neighbours and for regional integration. In such a time, becoming host to a regional body such as MRC, I think provided a very real symbol of what regional cooperation meant in practical terms.

Q: What would Lao PDR have to gain from the Secretariat's move to Vientiane?

A: The Secretariat operates on the basis of principles of information-sharing and transparency, and we communicate the results of our work to a very wide range of stakeholders both within and outside the region. And we also engage very actively in training and capacity-building of staff at all levels. The many partnership arrangements or MOUs that MRC has developed with agencies all over the world is a reflection of the importance that international donors, multilateral organisations, research institutions, universities and NGOs place on social and economic development in the Mekong River Basin. I think any developing country would benefit immensely from being host to the Secretariat and I think that is also what the Government of Lao PDR is looking forward to.

Q: Could you point to some models, agencies or even personalities that have represented some positive "turning points" for the Mekong cooperation arrangements.

A: During the four years I have spent with MRC I have had the privilege to meet a lot of true friends of the organisation all over the world. It is as if the Mekong infuses a lasting passion with people who have once been in touch with the river.

You know, before 1975, the US Government was the biggest donor and most important partner to the Mekong cooperation. Then they left. But despite the many years that they were absent, there are still a lot of people in the US with interest and strong feelings for the MRC. The role of rivers in food security is particularly important in a region such as the Mekong, where many of the population live very close to the poverty line. It is very good for the organisation that the US is now returning as a partner.

In recent years, the Government of Denmark has played an active role as the biggest donor to MRC. In the difficult years in 1997 and 1998, when several donors left or scaled back their assistance,

Reflections...

Denmark stood firm...I think without the very generous support from Denmark, who remains a major donor, MRC might not exist today.

Dr Arthit Ourairat who in his capacity as Minister of Science, Technology and Environment represented Thailand as member of the MRC Council from 1999 to 2000 always showed great vision...He was the architect behind the proposal to increase the annual member country contribution that was adopted by the Council in 2000 and which will enable the four countries to fully cover the costs of running the Secretariat from 2012.

His Excellency Mr. Khy Tainglim, Minister of Public Works and Transport in Cambodia and the present Chairman of the MRC Council has played a most important role. He truly represents the often referred to "Mekong Spirit" that in its real meaning is about putting national interests and cultures aside and focusing on regional, common interests when the cooperation turns difficult.

Q: What are your thoughts about the future of the Mekong regional cooperation?

A: It is my hope that the strong foundation that the organisation rests on today, in combination with the ownership shown by the four countries, can help overcome the major challenges ahead. MRC depends almost entirely on the generosity of international donors. With declining budgets for ODA in many donor countries, only the best-performing projects can expect to get funding.

The relocation of the Secretariat from Phnom Penh to Vientiane in 2004 will be one of the biggest challenges to the organisation in the immediate future. If that is done successfully - and a lot of preparations have been made to secure that - then I see a bright future for the cooperation. To remain strong the MRC needs a well functioning Secretariat with well-educated and experienced regional and international experts on its staff. And the people of the Lower Mekong Basin need a strong MRC in the years to come, when there will be so much more pressure on the shared resource base from which they derive their livelihoods.

Mekong issues at the Water Forum



Jim Holmes

River basin development and water transport issues were profiled in two separate sessions at the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan in March.

Under the Integrated Water Resource Management theme, MRC Joint Committee members made up a panel of presenters discussing key issues in the Mekong River Basin and answered questions from the floor. In the audience were agencies with a "Mekong mandate", donors, representatives of UN agencies, government officials from Japan and other countries, and NGOs. Topics discussed included the status of the MRC as an organisation, coordination with other agencies, water transport, dams and poverty reduction.

In the Inland Water Transport theme, all six countries of the Mekong River Basin

were represented on a speakers' panel, consisting of high-ranking transport officials, discussing approaches to navigation on the Mekong.

The sessions highlighted the changes in a fast-developing region, and the need for regional cooperation to manage these changes appropriately. "It is a chicken-and-egg question," said Lieven Geerinck, Navigation Programme manager. "Should we first work on facilities, such as ports and waterway improvements, in order to promote navigation on the Mekong - or introduce the safeguards, before the volume of river traffic increases? The Mekong is one of the most pristine rivers in the world, so we have to be very careful."

Many other sessions featured MRC staff on their panels, including sessions on water and peace and flood management.

New atlas launched

Delegates at a Mekong business forum in Bangkok on 12-13 June were among the first in the region to see the new Social Atlas of the Lower Mekong Basin. The soft launch of the new atlas on 12 June targeted over 600 businesspeople, investors and researchers - many with potential to influence the direction and scope of development in the river basin - on the first day of the conference "Business Opportunities in the Mekong", organized by The Nation media group at Le Royal Meridien Hotel in Bangkok.

The new Social Atlas contains a series of 51 maps showing comparisons at province level for indicators on population, labour force, living standards, health and education. It shows a river basin in which about 80 per cent of the population live in rural areas, including small, dispersed villages, and district and provincial towns.

The Atlas clearly shows that the Lower Mekong Basin, with its 55 million-strong population, is poised on the brink of change. Cambodia and Lao PDR, located almost completely within the river basin, will double their population in the next 20 years if current population growth rates continue. However, malnutrition and lack of access to education are still widespread. Migration in search of work opportunities is significant, with the key growth areas being Phnom Penh, logging areas and areas of trade and cross-border travel such as Koh Kong and Krong Pailin provinces in Cambodia.

The Social Atlas was produced by the Mekong River Commission Secretariat as part of the basin development planning process currently under way in the region. Copies are available through the Documentation Centre of the Secretariat.

New Information Products

Maps

A1 size US\$12
A2 size US\$10
A3 size US\$8



Topographic map

This map shows elevation in metres (11 classes), river network and water bodies, major settlements and administrative boundaries in the Lower Mekong Basin to the scale of 1:2,000,000.

Forest and land cover in 1997

This map shows forest and land cover with 13 classes of land use, river network and water bodies, major settlements, roads, railroads and administrative boundaries in the Lower Mekong Basin to the scale of 1:2,000,000. The land use data is derived through visual interpretation of Landsat TM satellite images from 1996 and 1997.

Sub-catchments

This map shows sub-catchments, river network and water bodies, major settlements and administrative boundaries for the Lower Mekong Basin to the scale of 1:2,000,000. The sub-catchments are derived from a digital elevation model produced with source data from topographic maps to the scale of 1:50,000 and 1:100,000.

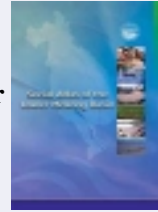
Watershed classification

This map shows five different watershed classes (from steep and rugged to gently sloping and flat), river network and water bodies, major settlements, roads, railroads and administrative boundaries for the Lower Mekong Basin to the scale of 1:2,000,000. The watershed classes are from topographic maps to the scale of 1:50,000 and 1:100,000.

Books

Social Atlas of the Lower Mekong Basin

Book and CD-ROM
June 2003



The 51 maps show indicators for population, labour force, living standards, health and education across the Lower Mekong Basin, enabling useful comparisons to be made.

The CD-ROM version comes with a mapping application enabling the output of customised maps from the data.

Book, 154 pages	US\$25.00
CD-ROM	US\$10.00
Book and CD-ROM	US\$30.00

Mekong: Mother of Waters

By Mette Holm, first published by Danida in 2001

Full-colour picture book published for the first time in English, offering a Danish journalist's account of her travels and daily life on the river.

Book, 44 pages US\$4.00

Biodiversity and Fisheries in the Mekong River Basin

Mekong Development Series No. 2. June 2003

Fisheries experts from the region argue persuasively for the elimination of boundaries between fisheries management and biodiversity conservation, showing that when biodiversity is well managed, fisheries production goes up.

Book, 36 pages US\$5.00

CDs



River Awareness Kit

February 2003

An introduction to basic scientific facts and concepts to do with river ecology. Designed for self-study.

CD-ROM US\$10.00

Fish migrations in the Mekong River Basin

Information on fish migration and spawning patterns, based on the work of the MRC Fisheries Programme between 1995 and 2002. Includes digital maps showing migration routes.

CD-ROM US\$5.00

Where There Is Water, There Is Fish

Educational documentary on fish migrations from Cambodia's Great Lake to the region.

VCD, 26 minutes US\$5.00

How to order

All products can be ordered from the MRC Secretariat's Documentation Centre. Postage costs apply. Mekong government agencies may write to the MRC to obtain free copies.

Check the MRC website for a full list of products. Credit card sales are also available through the website.

For maps sent by mail, there is US\$3.50 charge for packing materials. All maps are high resolution inkjet prints on plain paper.

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Forecasts for flood-prone villages

Flood season preparations kicked off in May this year with the planting of 27 flood marks in 6 flood-prone villages near the Mekong at Neak Leung in Cambodia - part of a "flood-referencing" project funded by the US government through the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to bring better flood warnings to village people.

The Mekong River Commission broadcasts daily flood forecasts on its website for 23 stations along the Mekong every day during the flood season from June to October. To ensure that the forecasts are relevant at village level, four or five measuring gauges - the flood marks - are planted at a selection of low to high points in each village. Over the next few months, through a partnership with the American and Cambodian Red Cross organisations, community volunteers will be trained to record daily water levels at each mark, and to make estimates of flood damage

to crops and property on a weekly basis.

The readings will be compared against the forecasts from the main station, with the expectation that in this way, each village will develop its own "reference" to the station forecast, so as to be able to consistently predict at what point flooding will occur. If the Neak Leung mainstream flood level is reached at 10 m, for example, village X will be able to tell that they in fact flood when the mainstream is at 11 m, while village Y will know that they already flood when the mainstream station is at 9 m.

The current pilot stage is now a test of how far the mainstream forecasts can be applied to usefully predict impacts of flooding across the river basin. Meanwhile the community volunteers can be advised of the mainstream forecasts by telephone and two-way radio through the Cambodian Red Cross' established networks.



Bun Veasna

Water for Peace in Southeast Asia

Peacebuilding efforts through the work of river basin organisations will be a major theme at the 1st Southeast Asia Water Forum in Chiangmai, Thailand, this November.

The theme, "Conflict Resolution and River Basin Organisations", will run over two days in the four-day forum, to be held from 17 to 20 November. It will feature presentations and panel discussions on case studies and approaches to resolving issues between countries and different stakeholder groups.

While Southeast Asia is a water-rich region, more than 90 per cent of all water used goes to agriculture - far above the global average of 70 per cent. The rest of the water use goes to households and

industry. Where countries or administrative regions share water resources, it is becoming more important to develop joint management approaches for sharing of this precious resource.

The Southeast Asia Water Forum aims to build capacity amongst water resources managers in the region, with an emphasis on how policy can be put into

practice. The Forum will also make proposals for action, based on input from participants and the outcomes of the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto, Japan that was held in March this year.



Jim Holmes



Research for real-life river basins

Issues of governance, food security, land use and water efficiency top the list of Mekong research topics currently proposed for funding under the Challenge Programme, a global research programme aimed at solving real-life problems in river basins around the world.

As regional coordinator for the programme in the Mekong River Basin, the Mekong River Commission held a kick-off workshop on 26-27 March in Phnom Penh, attended by representatives of government agencies, universities and other research institutions from five countries, including China.

The workshop, intended to help determine research priorities for the region, sparked the input of concept notes for proposed research into the programme cycle. Out of 99 concept notes accepted by the programme for development into full research proposals, 28 deal exclusively or in part with the Mekong region. After a final selection process, a global Baseline Conference in Nairobi on 1 to 6 November will launch the research projects.

The Challenge Programme focuses on the

"water-for-food challenge"- to find ways of growing more food without increasing water use, while improving rural livelihoods and protecting the environment. Water use is closely tied to food security. In the Mekong region, 80 to 90 per cent of all freshwater use is devoted to growing food. Rice-growing is a heavy user of water, with a minimum of 3,000 litres needed to yield one kilogramme of rice.

The Mekong River Basin is one of seven benchmark basins highlighted for study under the programme. Benchmark basins are river basins in developing regions, facing the pressures of population growth and economic development. Other river basins in the programme are the Nile and Limpopo in Africa, the Sao Francisco in Brazil, the Indo-Gangetic river basin in South Asia, Iran's Karkheh river basin, and China's Huanghe (Yellow) river basin. The Volta river basin in West Africa and the Andes in Latin America are also associated with the programme.

For more information on the Challenge Programme, visit the website of CGIAR, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, at www.cgiar.org

The water came up to here . . .



Behind Mel Soy's house in Lovea Em district, near the banks of the Mekong in Cambodia, two rows of young mango trees stand on parallel dikes. They are a sign of hope that somehow, this year, her family will be able to cope and the floods will not be so bad.

Three years ago in the year 2000, heavy flooding brought chest-high water to the 55-year old woman's backyard, killing off their mature stands of banana and mango. Since then, she says, the flooding has been quite heavy every year.

Like many others in the Lower Mekong Basin, Mel Soy lives on a floodplain veined with streams and tributaries draining into the Mekong. Lovea Em district lies between the Mekong and Bassac rivers as they go on their parallel courses before fanning out into the broad Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

Further towards the river, on a low-lying peninsula framed by the Mekong and a tributary called Tonle Touc, Chie Kolap lives in fear that her wooden house will wash away. No tall trees survive here, for every year the Tonle Touc's waters rise to join the Mekong, and the area becomes an Ovaltine-coloured sea. The village people used to grow dry-season crops on this land, but never lived here. But with the growing population in the area now, there is a land shortage. "I married and had three children. I just couldn't keep living on my parents' land," the 40-year old woman says. Before the floods come, her house will be braced, inside and out, with wood and bamboo supports, and she has a small boat for going places. All the same, she says, "The flood season is the most difficult time of year for us."



**Hard copies of the Mekong News newsletter can be obtained from the Mekong River Commission Secretariat
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