

MRC 3rd Annual Flood Forum

Don Chan Palace

Vientiane, Lao PDR

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WELCOME SPEECH

By

Dr Olivier Cogels

Chief Executive Officer

Mekong River Commission

Your Excellency 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,

Dr. Ayse Sezin Tokar, USAID Advisor,

Excellencies,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the Mekong River Commission I am delighted to welcome you all to the third annual Mekong Flood Forum here in Vientiane.

In particular I would like to extend my gratitude to H.E. Sitaheng Rasphone, for presenting the opening address and to their excellencies and representatives from 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 support for this forum.

I welcome our distinguished guests from our member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam and our dialogue partners, Myanmar and China and all those participants and delegates who have travelled from other countries to be here today.

Partnerships are one of the cornerstones of the MRC's new Flood Management and Mitigation Programme and I would also like to acknowledge the important inputs and continued support of our member countries and associated line agencies, and the donors for their ongoing support with the implementation of the FMMP.

For the next two days the delegates in this room will be discussing a broad range of topics concerning flood management and mitigation in the context of the MRC's new FMMP and I am confident that by pooling this extensive range of expertise and knowledge we will achieve some sound practical results over the next two days.

Practical results are what we need if we are to avoid the devastating impact of floods in this region. You will hear from H.E. Mr Sitaheng Rasphone about the huge economic losses caused by severe flooding and the shocking human toll these natural disasters take on the poorest communities. The truth is much of this misery could be avoided by extensive use of some relatively simple measures such as improved communication between those at risk.

The time has come to take some action at grass roots level. We need to see the basics in action. We need to see thousands of loudspeakers and bulletin boards in villages. We need to hear community radio stations broadcasting flood information so villagers can take preventative action. We need to teach these communities how to help themselves, not only a few of them; all of them.

This is not to say research and pilot work is not one of the essential elements of a successful Flood Management and Mitigation Programme. This is to say that research and pilot work would be a waste of energy and money if, in

the end, when a flood comes, hundreds of thousands of people cannot be warned in time and told the correct measures to take. Therefore, the production of much more detailed topographic data in flood prone regions is also crucial. Knowing why something is happening and even knowing when it will happen is of no use to anyone if the appropriate information is not disseminated to all those who will bear the brunt of the flooding.

The recent tsunami disaster and the rapid responses shown in the subsequent aftershock alarm amply demonstrated how lives can be saved when warnings are spread quickly and massively.

If these vulnerable communities are to help themselves, they need our help. MRC's Flood Management and Mitigation Programme, with continued assistance from the US Office for Foreign Disaster Assistance, the Cambodian Red Cross, the American Red Cross and Action Against Hunger last year expanded its flood early warning system from six villages to 34 more in five flood-prone areas of Cambodia and the project will now be expanded to Lao PDR. Now it is time to make these pilot projects a regular part of everyday life for all communities concerned.

Your Excellency Mr Sitaheng Rasphone

Excellencies,

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Ladies and Gentlemen

The FMMP is a good example of an integrated approach to water resource management and fits well with the MRC's new orientation to integrated water resource management at basin level, our vision for development in the region. It also complements the integrated nature of MRC's work receiving valuable inputs from the other important components of MRC's work such as the Basin Development Plan, the Environment Programme, the Technical Support Department, Water Utilisation Programme and the Watershed project of the Agriculture, Irrigation and Fisheries Programme.

It is also a good example of how our member countries are willing to work in cooperation with each other on sensitive trans-boundary issues.

We are confident that with a constructive and integrated approach, based on close cooperation between sectors and between countries, we will be able to meet our goal of an economically prosperous, socially just and environmentally sound river basin and also to save lives.

Thank you for your attention and please make the most of this important time together.